

无别无离 | Without Farewells, Without Parting

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by [dragongirlG](#)

Summary

On the way back from a night hunt, Jin Ling, Lan Sizhui, and Lan Jingyi step into an array that takes them back in time, landing in the past two days before Jin Ling's hundredth day celebration. Unsure if this is a dream or reality, the three of them do their best to fix the events that led to the deaths of Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli, Wei Wuxian, and the Wen remnants, while Jin Ling and Lan Sizhui enjoy the company of family members that they never got the chance to know.

Notes

Title from Jiang Yanli's character song 意难平 (Discontented) on the Untamed OST. See a wonderful translation by hunxi-guilai [here](#).

This work is complete and chapters will be posted every 2-3 days, with the exception of the prologue (posted with the first chapter) and the epilogue (to be posted 1 day after the last chapter). I used pinyin for titles and terms of address, and I did not italicize them for this fic.

The majority of this story takes place in the universe of The Untamed/Chen Qing Ling, and so I have chosen not to tag MDZS as a fandom. The only exception is Wei Wuxian's gift to Jin Ling, which is a Clarity Bell with a nine-petaled lotus - as described in the novel - instead of a bracelet.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [Restricted Work] by [dragongirlG](#), [evirtual3](#)

Prologue

Afterward, Jin Ling will blame himself for being so careless. Lan Jingyi will interrupt and claim it was his impatience that catalyzed the whole event. And Lan Sizhui ...well. Lan Sizhui will be a little too busy working through other emotions to even hear anybody's scolding.

But it starts like this.

Jin Ling, Lan Sizhui, and Lan Jingyi are returning from a successful night hunt, walking along the road in former Moling Su territory, when they spot a spirit net fluttering in the treetops.

"Isn't that one of yours, Jin-zongzhu?" Lan Jingyi nudges Jin Ling with his elbow, grinning.

Jin Ling huffs and shoves him away. "I told you, those spirit nets don't belong solely to the Jin sect anymore. Wei Wuxian—um, I mean, Da-jiujiu said it'd only be fair to distribute them to the other sects, including *yours*."

"Well, there shouldn't be one here, anyway," Lan Jingyi mutters, scowling. "There aren't any cultivators left in these parts. They all got reabsorbed into other minor sects after that traitor Su She died."

"Perhaps it's just left over from an old night hunt," Lan Sizhui suggests. "We should go and take it down before it catches an unsuspecting animal or person passing by."

They traipse through the woods with their hands on their swords, breathing quiet sighs of relief at the shaded reprieve from the noon sun. Lan Sizhui slows as they approach the net, squinting as he examines the knots securing it to the tree. "It should be pretty easy," he declares. "Two of us should cut at either end, and one of us should stay on the ground to catch it. Let's check the perimeter first and make sure it's not a trap."

"I don't see anything," Lan Jingyi says with a shrug. "Let's just get this over with so we can move on."

"I'll fly up and cut the net from one end," Jin Ling volunteers.

"I'll get the other," Lan Jingyi says.

Lan Sizhui nods and steps toward the net, carefully assessing the area for any latent spiritual power. "On my mark," he says, taking another step to steady his balance. "Three—two—one —"

Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling, hovering on their swords, cut the knots simultaneously. Immediately, spiritual energy bursts forth from the ground, engulfing Lan Sizhui with a roar.

"Sizhui!" Lan Jingyi yells, hastily flying down into the light.

"No, Jingyi, don't!" Lan Sizhui cries, but it's too late. Lan Jingyi is already in the middle of the array, gripping Lan Sizhui's hand tightly. A second later, Jin Ling lands next to them with a thump.

"What the hell is this!" Jin Ling yells, kicking dead leaves aside. He dragging his sword Suihua along the ground as he searches for the edges of the array.

"I don't know, but we need to get *out*—"

There's a thunderous boom and a blinding surge of light, and an agonizing squeezing sensation; and that's the last thing any of them know as they disappear from the woods, leaving their swords and a tattered spiritual net in their wake.

Chapter 1

Lan Sizhui wakes with a startled gasp, staring up into the hazy sky above him. There's something wrong, he realizes, something slick and oily in the air—something that feels like —

"Resentful energy," Lan Sizhui breathes, his voice coming out a good deal higher than normal, and that's when he looks down and sees his fingers, which are much smaller and thicker than he remembers, and his robes, which are brown and grey, made of scratchy homespun cloth—

"*Agh!*" a childish voice screams in his right ear. Lan Sizhui startles like a frightened rabbit, a loud gasp escaping his throat as he takes in the person next to him.

"J-Jingyi?" Lan Sizhui breathes, for that's who it must be, but—Lan Jingyi is *small*, with chubby cheeks and messy hair and a smooth white forehead ribbon. He's wearing dirt-streaked white robes with a simple cloud pattern; Lan Sizhui recognizes the design as that of the youngest Lan disciples' uniforms.

"Sizhui," Lan Jingyi says in horror, his toddler voice ringing out in the air, "You're—you're a baby!"

"So are you," Lan Sizhui points out archly.

"Where are we? What are you *wearing*? What the hell happened?" He gasps and jumps up. "Oh—oh shit—where's Jin Ling?"

Lan Sizhui scrambles up from the ground, his stomach leaden with guilt at not realizing Jin Ling's absence earlier. "Jin Ling!" he calls, stumbling a little on his too short legs. "Jin Ling, where are you?" The barren trees around him seem very tall and imposing, and the resentful energy in the air seeps into his meridians, making him shiver.

"D-do you feel that?" Lan Jingyi asks, wrapping his arms around himself, his face pale.

"Yeah," Lan Sizhui responds. He reaches for his sword, which of course isn't there; with a frantic gasp, he reaches into his robes for some talisman paper, only to find nothing but a grass butterfly.

Wait.

Lan Sizhui studies the grass butterfly, the cogs in his brain turning. Physically, he's about... three years old right now. He's wearing rough, patchy clothes; his hair is in a tangled topknot, bare of his forehead ribbon; he's surrounded by mostly dead trees; resentful energy is pulsing in the air.

There's only one place they could be.

Not only that, there's only one *time* they could be.

"Jingyi," he says quietly, "We're in the Burial Mounds. And I—I think we've traveled sixteen years into the past."

Lan Jingyi gapes at him, stunned into a rare, prolonged silence as the wind howls menacingly through the trees.

"Fuck," he finally utters. "What do we do now?"

Jin Ling wakes bundled in soft gold finery, warm and comfortable in a way he hasn't felt in years. He opens his eyes and rubs at them with his fists, frowning as he takes in the tall ceilings of Jinlintai. The last thing he remembers is nighthunting with Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi—

Jin Ling's gasp gets caught in his throat and comes out more like a choked gurgle. Alarmed, he tries to kick the sheets off and lift himself up onto his elbows, only to find his limbs trapped against his sides. The most they can do is twitch against the blankets that are still restraining him to the bed. A distressed wail rises in his throat. "Sizhui! Jingyi!" he tries, but all he's managing to make are unintelligible whimpers, and when he runs his tongue along his lips he finds that he has no teeth.

He bawls in terror, humiliating tears streaming down his face, trying to do something—*anything*—to wake up from this nightmare. Nothing seems to work; he can't speak, can't move, can't even sense his golden core and he's alone—

There's the sudden scent of lotus and peonies, and Jin Ling finds himself looking up into a face he's only seen once, in a carefully preserved painting tucked away in Jiujiu's quarters at Lotus Pier. His mother—Jiang Yanli—is standing over him, smiling down at him and making gentle cooing noises. "A-Ling," she says. She lifts him up with infinite care, tucking him against her breast.

Jin Ling barely has time to be embarrassed before he's overcome with another bout of tears, a confusing blend of happiness, incredulity, and grief. This isn't a nightmare anymore, it's a dream, a good dream, and he doesn't want it to end.

"A-Ling," says Jiang Yanli, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead and bouncing him up and down, "what's the matter? Are you hungry?"

Jin Ling quickly turns his face away before he accidentally gets an eyeful of something he doesn't want to see.

"Not hungry," Jiang Yanli says with a strange, wistful tone as she strokes Jin Ling's wispy hair. "You know, when your da-jiujiu was younger, he'd—" She cuts off, shaking her head. A slight tremble enters her voice. "Only one day until your hundredth day celebration, A-Ling. A-Xian will be so happy to meet you. I know he's prepared a wonderful gift. You know that he gave you your courtesy name? Rulan." She laughs. "Him and Hanguang-jun..."

Jin Ling's mind spins. The only thing he knows about his hundredth day celebration is that Wei Wuxian lost control of Wen Ning and accidentally killed Jin Ling's father and some other Jin relative at Qionggqi Path. That's the official story, at least. Jin Ling's been wondering if his xiao-shushu—no, if *Jin Guangyao* and his minion Su She were behind *that* whole mess as well. He hasn't yet found the courage to ask either of his living uncles for details about the incident. Jiujiu would probably yell at him, and Wei Wuxian—well, he'd probably get really sad and try to hide it by smiling and claiming his memory is too poor.

"A-Li? Is everything all right?"

A-die, Jin Ling thinks, gaping at his father in the flesh. There's a lithograph of Jin Zixuan somewhere in Jinlintai—Jin Ling's grandmother had one commissioned shortly after his death, and she used to keep it in her rooms—but seeing him up close like this, with Jiang Yanli at his side, is beyond anything Jin Ling could have imagined.

"A-Ling just needed his a-die and a-niang," Jiang Yanli says with a rueful smile. "I think he woke up alone and got scared."

Jin Zixuan steps closer and dangles Suihua's tassel above Jin Ling's head. Jin Ling reaches for it automatically, surprised to find his arms free of their tight swaddle. Jiang Yanli must have loosened the blankets. He hadn't even noticed.

"I just greeted Wanyin at the gates," Jin Zixuan says to Jiang Yanli. Jin Ling perks up. It's always nice to see Jiujiu, and he's curious to meet a younger, less grumpy version of him, even if it's only in a dream.

Jiang Yanli smiles at Jin Zixuan softly. "Thank you for telling me. I'll go and meet him in the reception hall, then I'll show him how the lotus pond is faring. You're welcome to join us."

"I will for dinner," Jin Zixuan declares with a nod.

"All right."

Jin Ling comes to several conclusions as Jiang Yanli carries him through the halls of Jinlintai.

First, it's entirely possible that he's been cursed, or trapped in some sort of prolonged state of Empathy with a spirit, or something else unseemly like that. If that's the case, then hopefully someone will snap him out of it somehow. Surely Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui have some kind of Gusu Lan composition they can play. If that fails, they can ring the Jiang Clarity Bell on his yaopei, or get help from Hanguang-jun and/or Wei Wuxian. Whatever the case, there's nothing Jin Ling can do about it, so he might as well make the most of this...dreamland.

Second, if this is a dream, that means he can do whatever he wants in it, and it won't affect his actual present. Future. Whatever. So there's no harm in making sure he gets to enjoy his parents' company a bit longer by trying to save their lives, right? Sure, he might be limited by being a *baby* with no teeth, but that can be worked around. Crying, for instance. Even at age sixteen, Jin Ling's still embarrassingly good at crying. Now, if he can *direct* the crying somehow...that might be useful.

What else do babies do? Eat? Shit? Oh—vomit. In his last letter, Ouyang Zizhen had written two entire pages complaining about how his new baby sister vomited all over Zizhen's brand-new, custom-designed ceremonial robes, and then did it again the next day after they'd been cleaned. Jin Ling doesn't really want to go around vomiting everywhere, but still—it's a good tool to have in his arsenal. Wei Wuxian's always telling him not to overlook any resource that could come in handy.

Now, Jin Ling knows there's a whole series of events that led up to his parents' deaths, the details of which have been muddled by time, outrage, and sect politics. However, the key players have never changed within the story: his xiao-shushu—Jin Guangyao, he quickly corrects himself; his da-jiujiu Wei Wuxian, who's still at the Burial Mounds; Wen Ning, the Ghost General (Lan Sizhui's uncle—Jin Ling still can't wrap his mind around it); Jin Ling's father Jin Zixuan; and that Jin relative who died at Qiongqi Path (Jin Ling doesn't even remember the guy's name; he was some distant...uncle? Cousin? Who knows.) If Jin Ling can somehow expose Jin Guangyao as the mastermind behind the whole situation, as the one who manipulated Wen Ning into murdering Jin Zixuan and framed Wei Wuxian for it—

But wait. Point three. Jin Guangyao had a key ally, and that ally was Su Minshan, leader of the Moling Su sect and creepy Hanguang-jun imposter who spent way too much effort trying—and failing—to defend his innocence at the Second Siege of the Burial Mounds. Dead in Jin Ling's time, body burnt to ashes in the firestorm of Nie Mingjue's rage, but doubtlessly still alive in this...dream, or whatever it is.

Didn't he have some kind of skin condition? Jin Ling had only caught a glimpse of it, but it'd been enough to gross him out—and for him to recognize it as scars from the Hundred Holes Curse. Which means someone *else* here is the recipient of the Hundred Holes Curse as well. Someone who...had a low level of cultivation. Jin Guangyao? No, that can't be right—he would never have put himself at risk like that. No, someone else. Someone like—

Ah, right. That Jin relative. Rumor had it he'd been cursed with an affliction by the Yiling Laozu, who refused to lift it even after he begged for mercy.

What a load of bullshit. Jin Ling hates his family sometimes.

He quickly assembles the pieces together. Su Minshan cast the Hundred Holes Curse on some unnamed Jin relative, who promptly went and accused Wei Wuxian of doing it—and brought a whole army of Jin cultivators *and* Lan cultivators as backup. Wei Wuxian arrived at Qiongqi Path with Wen Ning, denied the curse, got attacked by the Jins, and tried to defend himself with Wen Ning. Su Minshan manipulated Wen Ning into killing Jin Zixuan, thus paving the way for Jin Guangyao to succeed as sect leader.

Wei Wuxian had made the perfect scapegoat.

Jin Ling wants to burst into angry tears at how well Jin Guangyao succeeded in tearing his family apart. But then he looks up, and he sees Jiujia—*younger*, and happy, and *smiling*—and his anger leaches out of him, slowly replaced by the comfort—the *hope*—that maybe he can set things right for this version of his family. Who cares if they're just some products of his imagination? He's here, and he's going to help them while he can.

"A-Ling," says Jiujiu, cradling him carefully and looking down at him, happy tears glimmering in his eyes. He's smiling. "Hi. I'm your jiujiu."

Jin Ling babbles at him, reaching for his hair and curling his chubby fingers around the thick strands, and thinks, *Everything is going to be all right, because I'm going to make sure to fix things.*

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Friendly reminder that all character POVs are biased! I actually find Jin Guangyao and Su She more complex than they're made out to be here, but Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi, and Jin Ling may all feel differently given their history with each character. If you disagree with this interpretation, please click the back button at any point.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui end up running into Wei Wuxian after an eternity of picking their way through the Burial Mounds in hopes of finding the Wen settlement.

"Wei-qianbei!" Lan Jingyi calls out, lighting up. Lan Sizhui elbows him hard, and Lan Jingyi blanches. "Uh. I mean. Great Yiling Laozu?"

Wei Wuxian halts and stares at Lan Jingyi, open-mouthed. He's a lot thinner than Lan Sizhui remembers—in fact, he's downright gaunt. Lan Sizhui only has vague memories of a tall man with a bright smile who loved to play, but now, looking at him with grown eyes, it's obvious how deep the shadows under Wei Wuxian's eyes are, how ragged he'd been running himself trying to protect the Burial Mounds.

"Xian-gege," Lan Sizhui says, trying out the name on his tongue. It fits surprisingly well. He reaches for Wei Wuxian's leg, wrapping his arms around it.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian scolds, brow drawing down in concern. He gently extracts Lan Sizhui from his leg. "What are you doing out so far? Didn't we tell you never to leave without an adult?" His gaze shifts back to Lan Jingyi, and he squints, tapping Chenqing against his chin. "Where did you come from, Little Lan?"

"My name is Lan Jingyi," Lan Jingyi scowls.

Wei Wuxian's mouth tugs into a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Lan Jingyi. How did you get here? Did Lan Zhan—did Hanguang-jun bring you? Is he around?"

Lan Sizhui discreetly steps on Lan Jingyi's foot, thinking fast. "It was the bad man, Xian-gege!" He tries his best to emulate the speech pattern of a three-year-old.

"The bad man?" Wei Wuxian's gaze sharpens. He looks around warily, shoves Chenqing into his belt, and holds out both hands, waiting until they've each taken one before shepherding them toward, presumably, the Wen settlement. "What bad man?"

"The bad man," Lan Sizhui repeats. "He looked like H-H—um, R-Rich-gege!"

"Rich-gege?" Lan Jingyi mouths. The incredulous expression on his toddler face is almost comical.

"Mn!" Lan Sizhui says. "He wore the same colors!"

"Yeah," Lan Jingyi says, catching on. "He looked like Hanguang-jun! But he wasn't! He had a qin and he was wearing blue and white but he had no forehead ribbon! And I knew right away who he was!"

"Who?" Wei Wuxian asks in a hushed voice.

Lan Jingyi takes a deep breath. "Su She," he whispers solemnly like he's imparting some great secret.

Lan Sizhui gives Lan Jingyi a tiny nod of approval. It *was* an array in Moling Su territory that started this whole mess. A story with a grain of truth will be easier to remember.

"Never heard of Su She," Wei Wuxian mutters, frowning as they approach a seemingly bare patch of ground. He sighs, dropping their hands and pulling Chenqing out of his belt. "Now, I want you both to stay very close to me and hold very still."

Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath and plays a complex, discordant tune, then slashes his hand in the air with quick, indecipherable motions. In the blink of an eye, the wards to the Wen settlement shimmer into existence, pulsing with swirls of black and red energy. "Come on, in we go," says Wei Wuxian, taking Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi's hands again and pulling them through.

The world transforms from barren to colorful in an instant. Fruit trees bloom around them, set alongside small huts and shacks that mark the borders of the turnip fields, which take up most of the immediate space. In the distance sits a thriving lotus pond, full of bright pink blooms illuminated by golden rays of sunlight. Farthest back sits the Demon-Subdue Palace, which looks a lot less decrepit than Lan Sizhui remembers from his recent kidnapping; the roof isn't collapsed, for one, and with the sunlight it doesn't even look that dark.

"A-Yuan!" someone shouts, and suddenly there's a rush of movement toward their little group—farmers covered in dirt and dressed in shades of brown, grey, and red. The only person Lan Sizhui recognizes is Ning-shushu; the rest are strangers, but—they're his family, the Wens, and tears spill down Lan Sizhui's face before he can stop them, transforming into wracking sobs before he can get himself under control.

"Aiyah," Wei Wuxian says softly, picking him up and slinging him up onto his hip. He gently thumbs away the tears on Lan Sizhui's cheeks. "Aiyah, A-Yuan, don't cry! You'll scare your new friend!"

"I'm not scared," Lan Jingyi protests, his lips wobbling like he's on the verge of crying himself.

"Wei-gongzi, thank you," says Wen Ning, relief written all over his face. "A-Yuan, he just—disappeared in front of my eyes in a flash of light! I went and patrolled the perimeter just like

you taught me but I couldn't find him!"

"Did you see anyone lurking around here?" asks Wei Wuxian. "Maybe a man who looked like Lan Zhan but wasn't?"

"Who are you talking about?" asks a woman with sharp, bright eyes. "And how on earth did a Lan child end up here?"

"It's Su She's fault," Lan Jingyi declares with a conviction that far exceeds the situation. At this point Su She *was* colluding with Jin Guangyao to frame Wei Wuxian for—well—everything, but as far as they know, the man didn't actually engineer Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui's arrival here. Still, Lan Sizhui allows himself the tiniest drop of petty satisfaction. He was raised by Hanguang-jun, after all.

"Did you say Su She?" the woman asks in a strange tone.

"What? Wen Qing, do you recognize that name?" Wei Wuxian asks.

Lan Sizhui's eyes go wide. That's Wen Qing? He's heard so much about her from Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning, and her work—recovered from the depths of Jin Guangyao's private vaults—is extraordinary. The sects had squabbled over her journals for weeks. When Lan Sizhui left the Cloud Recesses, Hanguang-jun was *still* working out who would receive which volume.

"Wei Wuxian, take the boys to my office," Wen Qing orders. "I want to look them over and make sure they're not hurt. We'll continue this conversation there. A-Ning, can you take my place and help Granny finish patching up the clothes?"

Wen Ning nods eagerly. There's an innocence to him that hurts to see. In Lan Sizhui's time Wen Ning is gentle and a little naïve, but sixteen years of torture and imprisonment have left their mark. Here, despite the black veins on his neck, he seems more like a junior disciple Lan Sizhui might teach than the infamous Ghost General.

Lan Jingyi shoots Lan Sizhui a worried look as Wen Qing leads them over to one of the houses. The widening of his eyes makes his question clear. *What the hell are we going to do?*

Lan Sizhui is still propped up against Wei Wuxian's hip, so there's not much he can do to respond. He considers what a three-year-old would do, then starts wriggling in Wei Wuxian's hold, kicking at his chest. "Aiyah, A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian huffs, setting him down on the ground. "So impatient, just like me! You really are my son!"

Lan Jingyi makes a choked noise.

Wei Wuxian laughs, glancing at Lan Jingyi. "You don't believe me? Ask Hanguang-jun! I told him, I birthed A-Yuan myself!"

"Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing sighs in exasperation. "Please do not confuse the children with your jokes."

"I'm not confused," Lan Jingyi insists.

"See? He's not confused. A-Yuan, are you confused?"

Lan Sizhui shakes his head.

Wen Qing rolls her eyes and opens the door, pointing to a flat slab of stone lined with scratchy blankets. Next to it stands a rickety bookshelf crammed with medicinal supplies.

"Up, boys."

Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi look at each other, then take each other's hands and head over to the bed, clambering onto it with a little help from Wen Qing.

"A-Yuan, if you and Lan Jingyi are good for Qing-jie's examination, I'll show you the gift I made for my nephew's hundredth day celebration!" Wei Wuxian grins, leaning against the wall and twirling Chenqing in his fingers.

Lan Jingyi gasps. "Jin Ling?"

Wei Wuxian blinks in surprise. "You've heard of him?"

"Uh...he's famous," Lan Jingyi says.

"Famous," Wei Wuxian echoes, looking thoughtful. "As the heir to the Jin, I suppose he is. Ha! Look at that! My nephew making a name for himself already! Although, I'm not sure that's a *good* thing..."

"A-Yuan, you first," Wen Qing announces, and then she's suddenly touching him, checking his meridians without any ceremony. It takes a lifetime's worth of self-restraint not to squirm and blush as she feels along his forehead, which feels much too exposed without his ribbon. She steps back, gently squeezing his shoulders. "Are you hurt?"

Lan Sizhui shakes his head.

Wen Qing scrutinizes him. "Well, if you feel strange later, you'll come tell me, won't you?"

Lan Sizhui nods. "Mm!" He widens his eyes, hoping it looks convincing. "I will!"

"Good. Don't follow Wei Wuxian's example and pretend like nothing's wrong when you're bleeding out from your stomach."

"Hey!" Wei Wuxian exclaims.

"Are you going to deny it?" Wen Qing asks, raising an eyebrow.

Wei Wuxian huffs and rolls his eyes. "Jiang Cheng didn't stab me *that* hard—"

Wen Qing raises her other eyebrow.

"Okay, well, he did, but he didn't know that I didn't—that I was going to take longer to heal!"

Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi exchange a knowing glance. Of course—everyone knows about Wei Wuxian's missing golden core in their time.

"Reckless fool," Wen Qing says without any heat, and she turns to Lan Jingyi. "Lan-xiao-gongzi, may I examine you?"

"...yes?" Lan Jingyi says, shooting Lan Sizhui a panicked look.

Just go with it, Lan Sizhui tries to convey with a little shrug.

Lan Jingyi remains surprisingly quiet and still as Wen Qing conducts her examination, although he does flush red with embarrassment when she touches his chest and abdomen. "All right, you're done," Wen Qing declares, putting her hands on her hips. She looks between the two of them. "The good news is, both of you are in good health and don't have any physical or spiritual injuries."

"And the bad news?" Wei Wuxian asks, even though she wasn't speaking to him.

"Where do I even start? Lan Jingyi somehow ended up here, which means we have to find a way to get him back to the Cloud Recesses without casting even more suspicion on us—on you particularly. Both of them got kidnapped and ended up outside the wards somehow, which means we have a serious security problem. And the fact that Su She is involved—" Wen Qing groans. "That man is trouble."

"Who *is* Su She, anyway?" Wei Wuxian asks, wrinkling his nose.

Wen Qing sighs. "He used to be an outer disciple of the Lan, but he betrayed them when Wen Xu attacked the Cloud Recesses. He told Wen Xu that the forehead ribbon was the key to getting into the Cold Pond Cave. That's when Hanguang-jun came out and gave himself up for the Indoctrination at Nightless City."

"And that's when Wen Xu broke Lan Zhan's leg and stole his piece of the Yin Iron," Wei Wuxian says, rage flashing in his eyes.

"Yes." Wen Qing sighs. "I'm genuinely surprised Su She didn't die during the Sunshot Campaign. Remember when he lost his sword while we were fighting the Waterborne Abyss?"

Wei Wuxian blinks, realization dawning in his eyes. "*That* guy?" he scoffs.

"Yes, that guy. Anyway, if what Lan Jingyi says is true—"

"It is!" Lan Jingyi interrupts.

"—that means he's survived and he's back to worming his way around the sects."

Lan Sizhui takes a deep breath, trying to shape his words in the context of three-year-old A-Yuan's knowledge. "The bad man has a friend! L-Lian..."

Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian turn to stare at him.

"Lianfang-zun," Lan Jingyi completes helpfully.

"Su She is working with Lianfang-zun? Jin Guangyao?" Wen Qing asks, incredulous. "How do they even know each other?"

"Um..." Lan Jingyi shoots a panicked glance toward Lan Sizhui, clearly at a loss. "I don't know!"

"Xian-gege," Lan Sizhui says quickly. "The uh...Fake-gege, Su She, he said, he's going to trap you! Like a cat and a mouse!"

"Trap me?" Wei Wuxian's eyes narrow.

"Mm! When you visit your nephew!"

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian says, crouching and grasping Lan Sizhui's shoulders, "what exactly did he say? Tell me."

Lan Sizhui swallows hard at the intensity in Wei Wuxian's gaze. "He—he had a flute, Xian-gege. Like yours. And he said...he's going to make Wen Ning do bad things. Then make it look like it's your fault."

"And—and he said he's following Lianfang-zun's orders," Lan Jingyi adds.

"He just told you all this?" Wen Qing asks.

"We were pretending to sleep," Lan Jingyi says.

"What did he want with you two?" Wei Wuxian asks with a frown.

"Don't know," says Lan Jingyi with a shrug.

"Lan-xiao-gongzi," Wen Qing says, holding his gaze, "what do you remember? Do you remember being taken from the Cloud Recesses?"

Lan Jingyi swallows nervously, clutching Lan Sizhui's hand. His palm is sweaty. "Um. I was visiting the rabbits. It was late, past bedtime! But I...I wanted to bring a rabbit to Hanguang-jun because he likes them and I wanted to cheer him up!"

"Lan Zhan has been upset?" Wei Wuxian interrupts with a concerned frown.

Lan Jingyi nods quickly. "He doesn't say it, but I can tell when I see his face! He misses you!"

Lan Sizhui elbows Lan Jingyi as Wei Wuxian's mouth drops open. "What? He does?"

"We're getting off track," Wen Qing interrupts impatiently. "What happened after you went to visit the rabbits?"

"Someone grabbed me and hit my head. It hurt! Then I woke up and Su She and A-Yuan were there!"

"What do you mean by 'there'?"

"A smelly cart," Lan Sizhui interjects. "With lots of rotten straw. Fake-gege put us in there underneath a blanket and he was talking to himself. He was saying lots of things about... about how Lianfang-zun should thank him." He silently sends an apology to whoever might need it, but stopping Su She and Jin Guangyao's scheme at Qiongqi Path really does take precedence over everything else. "We were scared, so we decided to pretend we were sleeping. And we rode for a long, long time! Then the cart stopped and Fake-gege put us on the ground and went away."

"And then you found us," Lan Jingyi declares with a flourish.

"I told Jingyi we're close to home! But then we looked and looked and walked around for a long time, and we still couldn't find anybody."

"Until we saw you, Wei-qianbei!" Lan Jingyi declares with a dramatic flourish. "You came and rescued us!"

"Wei-qianbei," Wei Wuxian echoes, his nose wrinkling.

Wen Qing draws herself up. "Wei Wuxian. You need to write to Hanguang-jun and tell him to come here at once."

"Much as I'd like to see Lan Zhan, he won't get here before I leave tomorrow morning," Wei Wuxian says with a yearning sigh.

Wen Qing rolls her eyes. "Have him meet you halfway to Jinlintai, then! We need to return this child to the Cloud Recesses as soon as we can."

"Can't it wait?"

"Do you think," Wen Qing asks, a dangerous look on her face, "that we are going to keep Jingyi here until after you get back? This is no place for—" Her eyes catch on Lan Sizhui, and she turns away, her shoulders slumping. "Just do it, Wei Wuxian. Tell Hanguang-jun you have a wayward Lan child that you need to hand over to him. Because the longer he remains in *our* custody, the more dangerous it is for us and him."

Wei Wuxian blows out a breath. "Fine. I understand. I'll go and write the letter right now."

"A-Yuan," says Wen Qing, "go with him and make sure he does as he says, all right?"

Lan Sizhui nods, swallowing past the hard lump in his throat.

"I want to come," Lan Jingyi says quickly. "I want to see the gift Wei-qianbei made for Jin Ling!"

"All right, all right," says Wei Wuxian with a strained laugh. "Come along."

Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi climb off the bed and follow Wei Wuxian to the Demon-Subdue Palace. Talisman paper is scattered all over the floor, and Lan Sizhui picks his way through carefully toward a small, rickety table that looks one good kick away from collapsing. On top sits a stubby, dried ink stick, a worn inkstone, a small bowl of water, a brush with fraying bristles, and a few wrinkled sheets of paper. A leather-bound journal sits underneath on the floor, wrinkled with water damage. Towards the back, the Blood Pool hums with resentful energy that is contained by many rows of hanging talismans.

"You live here?" Lan Jingyi asks in a hushed voice.

"I do, Little Lan," Wei Wuxian says, meandering over to the raised, blanket-covered platform next to the Blood Pool that apparently serves as a bed. He picks up a wooden box. "I know, I know, it's nothing like the luxury of the Cloud Recesses. Hanguang-jun wouldn't even stay one night." He can't quite hide the bitterness in his tone. "I find it hard to believe he misses me."

Lan Jingyi looks horrified. "Of course Hanguang-jun misses you! He's in love with you!"

Wei Wuxian chokes, whipping around with wide eyes. "Excuse me?"

Lan Sizhui steps hard on Lan Jingyi's foot, but Lan Jingyi will not be deterred. "Don't you love him too?" Lan Jingyi asks.

"I—" Wei Wuxian blushes red. "It doesn't matter! It doesn't. We can't—" Wei Wuxian sighs, scrubbing a hand over his eyes, then puts on a cheerful, fake smile, striding to the table and putting the wooden box on top of it. "Didn't you two want to see the gift I made for Jin Ling? Let me show you."

The box is made of peach wood, and the interior is lined with soft red cloth. Inside sits a silver bell masterfully carved with a nine-petaled lotus, attached to a tassel with a white jade pendant. The artistry of the carving is impressive, but the power humming within is even more so. "As long as A-Ling wears this bell, no low-level fae, demons, ghosts, or monsters can ever get close to him. It'll protect him for the rest of his life, even when I'm gone."

He says the last statement like it's a matter of fact, and Lan Sizhui's stomach twists with the horrible realization that Wei Wuxian was probably expecting to die at any point.

He also realizes that he's never seen Jin Ling wear any such bell for as long as Lan Sizhui has known him.

Before he can dwell on that further, he feels his cheeks being pinched. "Aiyah, A-Yuan, why the long face? I'm going to make a bell for you after I come back. I just haven't decided on the carving design yet."

Lan Sizhui hastily blinks back his tears. "I want to go with you and Lan Jingyi to see Jin Ling," he says. "I *need* to go with you."

"What?" Wei Wuxian sighs and kneels so that they're face to face. "A-Yuan, I'm sorry. You can't."

"I want S—I want A-Yuan to go too. I won't go if he doesn't," Lan Jingyi says, squeezing Lan Sizhui's hand.

"Aiyah, aiyah, aren't you Lans supposed to respect your elders?" Wei Wuxian scratches his head, wetting the ink stick and starting to grind it. "Why don't you help me write this letter? What should I say to Hanguang-jun?"

"Tell him you love him," Lan Jingyi declares.

"Absolutely not," Wei Wuxian retorts.

Wei Wuxian dithers for half a *shichen* over the letter, carefully musing over each turn of phrase before finally writing it down. After a *ke* passes, Lan Jingyi gets bored and grabs the hundredth day celebration invitation Hanguang-jun wrote to Wei Wuxian, silently mouthing the words as he traces the characters with one finger. After that, he starts paging through Wei Wuxian's journal, much to Wei Wuxian's amusement (and Lan Sizhui's secret approval).

Lan Sizhui, however, stays perched beside Wei Wuxian, his heart in his throat as he observes the tremble in Wei Wuxian's hands and the exhausted slump of his shoulders. He no longer wonders whether he and Lan Jingyi have the right to interfere with the upcoming events: the massacre at Qionggai path, the slaughter of Jin Zixuan, the battle at Nightless City and all that followed afterward. No. It is vital that they *do*. If Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun can get their happy ending earlier; if Jin Guangyao, Su She, and even Xue Yang can be exposed earlier; if Nie Mingjue can avoid succumbing to a forced qi deviation; if Jin Ling can grow up with his loving parents—

Jin Ling. Lan Sizhui wonders if Jin Ling also somehow made it back here. He'd only be an infant, so he'd be limited in how much he could do, but still—Jin Ling is smart. There must be some other way he can change things for the better. And if Lan Sizhui manages to get himself to the hundredth day celebration with Lan Jingyi, then the three of them can figure out *some* way to communicate.

"All right, I'm all done," Wei Wuxian declares, sealing the letter and slapping three different talismans onto it. He sends it off with a few sharp notes on Chenqing. "I've tried to make it get to Lan Zhan as fast as I can. If we're lucky, he'll receive it before he goes to bed tonight, but I doubt he'll be able to get here by tomorrow morning." His stomach growls loudly, and he shoots to his feet, taking Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui each by the hand. "Come on! It's time for dinner!"

Dinner turns out to be rice, pickled radishes, soggy boiled greens, and some gristly meat, the last of which is given exclusively to Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi. It's not the most luxurious meal Lan Sizhui's ever had, but it is hearty and filling enough that he knows he won't be going to bed hungry. The rest of the Wens supplement their meal with hand-picked fruit, or, in Wei Wuxian's case, a continuous supply of fruit wine. Wen Qing cuts off his supply after two jugs and refuses to give him more despite his complaints.

"We made a deal, remember?" she says. "Besides, you need your full faculties for your journey tomorrow."

Wei Wuxian sighs, dropping his head in his hands. "Do you think Lan Zhan will come?"

"Yes," Wen Qing says. She grasps Wei Wuxian's shoulder gently. "Wei Wuxian. Go to bed."

"He didn't stay last time," Wei Wuxian grumbles. "Not even when A-Yuan let slip there was going to be a feast!"

"Did you ask him to stay?" Wen Qing asks with a pointed glare.

"Well—not in so many words," Wei Wuxian mutters.

"You see my point."

"Do I?" Wei Wuxian mumbles, his cheek pressed into his hand. He looks like he's about to fall over.

"A-Ning, come over here, please," Wen Qing calls.

Wen Ning blinks and sets down the tall tower of dishes he's been carrying, coming to her side. "Is everything all right?" He wraps an arm around Wei Wuxian's shoulders, hoisting him into a standing position. "Wei-gongzi, are you feeling sick?"

"Not sick," Wei Wuxian mutters with a scowl. "Okay, maybe a little—heartsick. Lovesick."

Lan Jingyi lets out a high-pitched noise of triumph. "I knew it!"

Wei Wuxian startles and looks around wildly, his eyes landing on Lan Jingyi. "Do not—" He waves a finger in Lan Jingyi's direction. "Do not tell him."

"Why not?"

Wei Wuxian groans. "Are you sure you're a Lan? You're the least obedient Lan I've ever met."

"I know," Lan Jingyi grins.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian says, putting on an air of disapproval, "Just what kinds of friends are you making these days? This one talks back!"

Wen Qing clears her throat.

"Fine, fine, I'll go to bed! You're worse than Lan Zhan and his rule about haishi," Wei Wuxian grumbles. He sways to the side and lands against Wen Ning, who starts leading him away.

"Can Lan Jingyi and I sleep with Xian-gege?" Lan Sizhui asks Wen Qing.

Wen Qing sighs. "Yes, but remember the rules. As soon as he starts having nightmares, come and get me and Wen Ning. And do *not* touch him."

Lan Sizhui nods. "I'll remember."

"You're a good boy, A-Yuan." Wen Qing gives him a sad smile. "Go and get some rest."

Lan Sizhui takes Lan Jingyi's hand, and they hurriedly skirt around the tables on their short toddler legs, rushing to follow Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning back into the Demon-Subdue Cave. Wen Ning sets Wei Wuxian down his bed, helping him lie down and tucking him into his blankets. It's a bizarre but adorable sight.

"Good night, Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning says quietly.

Wei Wuxian makes a snorting noise and falls asleep.

"Come on," Wen Ning whispers, beckoning Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi over. They curl up on either side of Wei Wuxian, and Wen Ning carefully wraps the blankets around them. "Jiejie reminded you of the rules, right? As soon as he starts moving, you get off the bed and come and get one of us."

"Are his nightmares that bad?" Lan Jingyi asks.

Wen Ning's mouth turns down. "Yes, Lan-xiao-gongzi. They're bad. Be careful, all right? A-Yuan will know what to do."

"Okay, Wen-gongzi."

Wen Ning's eyes widen, and he hurriedly waves his arms. "Just call me Ning-gege. Wen-gongzi reminds me way too much of my cousins."

"Oh. Okay, Ning-gege."

"Good night, Ning-shushu," Lan Sizhui says.

"Good night, A-Yuan. Good night, Jingyi. Sleep well."

Wen Ning gives them a small smile and tiptoes out of the cave.

Lan Sizhui holds very still, fighting his body's urge to sleep. It must be way past haishi by now. Between the night hunt and the time travel, it's been an exhausting day, but this is the only chance he and Lan Jingyi will have to talk by themselves. He lets his breathing even out alongside Wei Wuxian's and counts the time as it passes, waiting for an entire *ke* before lifting himself up onto his elbows.

"Jingyi?" he whispers across Wei Wuxian's prone body.

Lan Jingyi doesn't respond.

"Jingyi," Lan Sizhui hisses.

Wei Wuxian makes a small, discontented noise, his fingers twitching. Lan Sizhui freezes.

"Lan Jingyi," Lan Sizhui whispers into the air once Wei Wuxian has settled. Still no answer.

Lan Sizhui sighs and sits up, scrubbing at his eyes, and looks over. Lan Jingyi is dead asleep, crunched up on his side with his back resting against Wei Wuxian's torso. Lan Sizhui groans

and flops back down, closing his own eyes, and falls asleep fervently hoping everything goes well tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think! I received some hateful comments lately and could use a boost.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely, kind words last chapter. They really cheered me up.

This chapter is a double-parter with Jin Ling and Lan Sizhui's POVs! Please enjoy.

When Jin Ling opens his eyes, gold butterflies are circling above his head. He wriggles around in his uncomfortably tight blankets, making a half-garbled noise that comes out at a much higher pitch than he expects, and then the realization hits: he's a baby. He's *still* a baby.

He squeezes his eyes shut and very purposefully decides not to panic. It's not entirely unexpected. He'd thought that going to sleep would somehow make yesterday all a very strange but satisfying dream, but it turns out that this really is his life right now.

That's all right. He has a half-baked plan to try to prevent his parents' deaths, which were the key point for everything else that has ever gone wrong with his life. As his da-jiujiu would say, a half-baked plan is better than none.

"A-Ling, you're awake already?" Jiang Yanli appears above Jin Ling, her mouth curved in a warm smile.

Jin Ling can't really move any of his limbs, so he settles for making an assenting noise and tries to smile back. It seems to work, for Jiang Yanli's face lights up in response.

"Let me feed you, and then we can join A-Xuan for breakfast," Jiang Yanli says, picking him up and cradling him against her breast. Jin Ling squeezes his eyes shut and opens his mouth, trying not to think about anything at all as he latches onto her nipple. He's a baby. This is necessary. He doesn't have any other form of sustenance available to him in this body, and he barely even has a core yet so he can't practice inedia.

He's not going to think about it. All he's going to do is concentrate on the sensation of hunger, and then the sensation of being full, and then the very nice sensation of being cleaned, changed, and carried by his mother.

Jiang Yanli keeps him tucked close as she sits down with Jin Zixuan and begins to eat her own breakfast.

"Mother says the preparations for A-Ling's celebration are nearly complete," Jin Zixuan says, nodding at the servants as they pour tea for him.

"Is there anything I should do to help?" asks Jiang Yanli with a furrowed brow.

Jin Zixuan shakes his head. "Mother says the best thing you can do today is rest. Once the celebration starts, you'll be very busy greeting all of the guests. It's best that you save your energy."

Jiang Yanli sighs. "I understand. I appreciate her concern."

Jin Zixuan clears his throat, fixing his eyes on his teacup. "Zixun is still...angry about Hanguang-jun's invitation to Wei Wuxian. I'll try to keep him occupied for most of today so he doesn't complain to my father or to A-Yao even more. If you can keep Wanyin away from him, I think that would also be best. They, ah—they came very close to a fight after you and Mother retired with Jin Ling last night after dinner. Only A-Yao's timely intervention prevented them from breaking into a brawl right in the middle of the hall."

Jiang Yanli's mouth goes into a tight little line. "Thank you for informing me. I'll ask A-Cheng to spend the day with me again."

Jin Zixuan sighs and rubs his temples. "Father also was up to his usual yesterday with the women who are visiting. I've asked Mianmian to take as many of them to town as she can, cultivators and servants alike, but Father, he...he always finds a way, especially when Mother is busy."

Jiang Yanli grasps Jin Zixuan's hand and squeezes it. "A-Xuan..."

"I just wish—" Jin Zixuan shakes his head miserably. "I don't understand why he can't stop. There's nothing I can do, nothing Mother can do, and it just—it's so shameful, what he does, so embarrassing and humiliating."

"I know," Jiang Yanli says softly. "I know, A-Xuan."

A sharp knock to the door makes them both jump and straighten. "Yes?" Jin Zixuan calls, straightening his shoulders and shaking out his sleeves.

A servant enters and bows timidly. "Please forgive the disruption, Jin-shao-zongzhu, Jin-shao-furen. Hanguang-jun is asking to see you both. He says it's urgent."

Jiang Yanli's eyes widen. "Let him in."

Hanguang-jun sweeps in a moment later, looking distinctly ruffled. Jin Ling is so busy being shocked at his expression that he almost forgets to be scared of him.

"Hanguang-jun," Jiang Yanli says, bowing hurriedly. "What is it? Is everything all right?"

Hanguang-jun bows back. "I just received a very strange letter from Wei Ying. It seems like something unusual happened at the Burial Mounds yesterday. My brother has given me leave to investigate immediately."

"Unusual?" Jiang Yanli's heartbeat speeds up; Jin Ling can hear it. "Is A-Xian all right?"

"From what I could glean, he was not in any danger and had not come to any harm," Hanguang-jun says. "Still, I would like to see for myself."

"Yes, of course," says Jiang Yanli, tears brimming in her eyes. "Hanguang-jun, please, I..."

"I will see to it that he—and anyone who chooses to accompany him—arrives safely and unharmed," Hanguang-jun says, his eyes dark with intent. "You have my word."

"Is there anything we can provide for your journey?" Jin Zixuan asks quickly.

Hanguang-jun shakes his head. "No, thank you, Jin-shao-zongzhu. I must go now." He bows to them both, then abruptly walks out of the room, one hand clenched tight around Bichen.

Jin Ling scrambles to put the pieces together. As far as he knows, Hanguang-jun never left Jinlintai until after the whole incident at Qiongqi Path. Had Lan Sizhui made it back too? If his journey was anything like Jin Ling's, then he would have ended up in the Burial Mounds in his toddler self's body. Is he also trying to find a way to change things?

And what about Lan Jingyi? Did he come back too? But he would have ended up in the Cloud Recesses...what could he do?

"I'll tell A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli breathes. "It'll do nothing but make him worry, and he'll be furious that he can't go after A-Xian, but he should know."

Jin Zixuan nods, a line in his brow appearing. "I won't tell Father or Zixun. I might tell A-Yao since he's—"

Jin Ling's heart jumps to his throat. He doesn't really understand what's going on, but the less Jin Guangyao knows, the better. He cries out, wiggling in the sling Jiang Yanli is carrying him in, and puts on as much of a temper tantrum as his infant body will allow. The tears and the rage come as naturally as breathing. For once, he's grateful for his own disposition toward hysteric dramatics.

"A-Ling?" Jiang Yanli rocks him, making soothing, shushing noises. "A-Ling, what is it?"

"Is he all right?" Jin Zixuan asks, coming close to them. He looks panicked. "What could have caused this? What should I do?"

"I don't know," Jiang Yanli says, brow furrowing. She reaches to undo her robes, but Jin Ling cries harder and turns his face away to clearly indicate that milk isn't what he wants. Jiang Yanli sighs and holds him out to Jin Zixuan. "Perhaps he wants his father?"

Yes. Yes, that could work. Jin Ling himself might be enough of a distraction for Jin Zixuan to forget all about his plan to inform Jin Guangyao about Hanguang-jun's sudden trip. Plus, Jin Ling spent most of yesterday with his jiujiu and his mother, which was all extremely nice, but he didn't get to spend time with his father. He deserves to be a little selfish, doesn't he?

Jin Zixuan's hold is surprisingly strong and comfortable. The Lans may be famous for their arm strength—as Lan Jingyi likes to point out to Jin Ling every time they see each other—but the Jins, or at least Jin Zixuan, could probably compare.

Jiang Yanli returns with a rattle drum that Jin Ling recognizes from his childhood. She twirls it back and forth, a hopeful look on her face, and Jin Ling lets himself get hypnotized by the

rhythm of the beads for a grand total of five seconds before realizing that his parents are speaking again.

"...won't tell Mother but I really should tell A-Yao; he has no grudge against Wei Wuxian and even supported Hanguang-jun's suggestion to invite him—"

Jin Ling sucks in a breath and lets out another wail, this time borne of true frustration.

"Oh, A-Ling," Jiang Yanli says with a worried frown. She shakes the drum, setting it down when his wails only increase. She holds out her arms. "A-Xuan, perhaps I—"

Jin Zixuan tries to hand Jin Ling back, and Jin Ling ups the volume, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Perhaps not," Jiang Yanli says, dropping her arms. Jin Ling subsides at once. "A-Ling must really want to spend time with you, A-Xuan."

A downcast expression crosses Jin Zixuan's face. He bounces Jin Ling slowly. "Do I spend too little time with him? My duties keep me busy, but any spare moment I get, I come to see you both. I—I want to be a good father."

"You are a good father, A-Xuan," Jiang Yanli says, giving him a reassuring smile. "Look at how content he is when you hold him. You're not a stranger to him."

Jin Zixuan's face softens, and he holds Suihua up so that Jin Ling can grasp its tassel. "I suppose that's true."

Jiang Yanli strokes Jin Ling's cheek. "I'll ask A-Mei to send for A-Cheng," she says, tightening the clasps on her robes and fixing her hair. "Would you like me to also send for A-Yao?"

Jin Ling lets out a cry of displeasure at the suggestion.

Jin Zixuan sighs, absently stroking Jin Ling's hair. "No, I'm sure he's occupied making sure all the guests are accommodated appropriately. I don't wish to burden him with this news, especially since—since there hasn't been any trouble yet. I trust Hanguang-jun will keep his word and sort out the situation."

Jiang Yanli nods. "Hanguang-jun is close with A-Xian. I'm confident he'll help A-Xian resolve whatever issue has arisen."

Relief flows through Jin Ling like a rushing river, then instantly dwindles down to a mere trickle as he realizes the gaping hole in his plan.

Jin Guangyao will probably find out about Hanguang-jun's plan to meet Wei Wuxian from Zewu-jun, who believed the best in him up until his death.

Maybe all the effort Jin Ling has put in still won't change anything that happens. Maybe Jin Zixun will still try to ambush Wei Wuxian at Qionggi Path, and maybe Jin Zixuan will still go after him trying to get him to back down, and maybe Su Minshan will still be there to

manipulate Wen Ning into killing everyone. Maybe Jin Ling's destined to become an orphan and—

Oh, no. He's crying again.

"A-Ling," Jin Zixuan says, sounding panicked. Jiang Yanli isn't in sight. She must be talking to the servants. "A-Ling, what's wrong?"

"*Die*," Jin Ling tries to say, but it comes out as an unintelligible gurgle because he doesn't have any teeth. Tears leak out of Jin Ling's eyes. He just wants to say that to his living father one time instead of to a stone tablet in the Jin ancestral hall. He wants a living father, period. He wants a living mother, period. How did he ever manage to live sixteen years of life without them? How will he survive losing his parents a second time?

It's not fair. It simply isn't.

"Oh, A-Ling," Jiang Yanli says softly. "What's got you so upset today? Are you ill? Do you have a stomachache?"

"Should I call for Lin-daifu?" Jin Zixuan asks.

Oh, no. Lin-daifu is the last thing Jin Ling needs. Yes, he feels wracked and shivery all over, but that's from emotional distress, not any kind of physical ailment. Plus, what if Lin-daifu figures out his soul is from a different time? It's unlikely, but that's not a risk he wants to take.

Jin Ling sucks in air, trying to regain control of himself, and reminds himself of his resolution yesterday. He's here to fix things in whatever way he can, even if it's not real. And he doesn't need to waste his time crying over events that have already happened—or haven't happened, as may be the case—when he could be basking in his parents' attention instead.

"He's quieted down," Jin Zixuan says, but he doesn't seem relieved. He's still holding Jin Ling. "A-Li, is that good?"

"His color's a lot better," Jiang Yanli says, reaching out and gently feeling Jin Ling's forehead. "And he doesn't seem to have a fever or seem to be in any distress." She frowns and reaches down, feeling along Jin Ling's cloth diaper, and Jin Ling forces himself not to kick. "Nothing there, either. I suppose he was just in a mood."

Jin Zixuan lets out a long sigh, the whole of him relaxing. Jin Ling nestles deeper into his hold, grasping his collar.

Jiang Yanli laughs softly. "A-Xuan. It seems you'll have to keep holding him for a while longer. Unless...there are duties you must attend to?"

Jin Zixuan makes a face. "Time with my son is more important. The other duties will have to wait."

Jiang Yanli's smile could light up all of Jinlintai. "Thank you, A-Xuan. I'll go and wait for A-Cheng in the outer room. He should be arriving soon."

Jin Zixuan looks down at Jin Ling with a small smile, rocking him gently. "A-Ling," he whispers. "You have the most wonderful mother, and you never need to worry whether she loves you. As for me...I hope you never doubt my own love for you. I'm determined to do right by you in ways my own father never would."

Jin Ling almost starts crying again, but he valiantly restrains himself like he's some perfect Gusu Lan disciple. He smiles up at his father, trying to convey just how happy he is to be with him right now. Regardless of what happens next, Jin Ling will have this memory, which is more than he's ever had before. He vows to treasure it while he can.

The morning that Wei Wuxian is due to leave, Lan Sizhui finds himself wriggling in Wen Ning's hold, screaming to the heavens alongside an even louder Lan Jingyi, who's been tucked unceremoniously under Wen Ning's armpit.

"I w-won't go without A-A-A-Yuan!" Lan Jingyi sobs, continuing to put on a tantrum that could rival Jin Ling's worst. He kicks fruitlessly at Wen Ning's hip and pounds at Wen Ning's chest, streaking dirt across his freshly laundered white robes. His forehead ribbon is askew, and his eyes are wild. Across from them, Wen Qing heaves a loud sigh and rubs her temples while Wei Wuxian glances anxiously up at the sky, running his hands through his hair and undoing the neat half-ponytail he spent so much time on when he woke up.

Lan Sizhui takes a moment to feel the slightest pang of guilt, then resumes his own bawling. "Jingyi! I'm going with Jingyi!" he hiccups hoarsely. "Jingyi! J-J-Jingyi!"

"Aiyah," Wei Wuxian sighs. "I guess I'll just leave both of you here and just go by myself!"

"Wei Wuxian!" Wen Qing shoots him a furious glare. "Absolutely not!"

"What do you propose I do?" Wei Wuxian asks, gesturing toward them jerkily. "I have to leave *now* or I'll be late!"

"Um," says Wen Ning, raising his voice so he can be heard above the screaming, "Why don't we take both of them?"

Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing shoot him identical looks of disbelief. "*Both?*" Wei Wuxian repeats slowly.

"We?" Wen Qing asks, raising her eyebrows.

"Um, I just meant," Wen Ning stutters, shifting his weight uncomfortably. "I, well, never mind."

"Actually," Wei Wuxian says, clapping his hands, "Wen Ning, that's a great idea! A-Yuan can meet Jin Ling like he's always wanted, Lan Jingyi will have company on the road, and I'll look a lot less suspicious carrying two children around instead of a single tiny Lan. And with another child I'll need an extra pair of hands anyway, so Wen Ning, you can come along like we originally planned—"

"No!" Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi shout in horror at the same time. Wen Ning jumps, almost dropping them onto the ground. He takes a deep breath and sets them onto their feet, keeping one hand on each of their backs so they don't fall over.

"The Ghost General can't come," Lan Jingyi blurts out.

Wen Ning flinches, his eyes dropping down to the ground. Lan Sizhui winces guiltily.

Wen Qing sighs, rubbing her temples. "A-Yuan, Lan Jingyi. Yesterday you said Su She—Fake-gege—had set up a trap for Xian-gege and Ning-shushu. Is that right?"

Lan Sizhui nods quickly. "With a flute."

Wen Qing lets out a slow breath, looking at her brother, then at Wei Wuxian. She shakes her head. "We can't risk it. Wei Wuxian, take the boys and go."

Wei Wuxian blinks in surprise. "Both of them? You're sure?"

Wen Qing nods. She looks, strangely, like she's about to cry. "Remember what we talked about a few days ago?" she says, glancing at Lan Sizhui once before meeting Wei Wuxian's gaze.

Wei Wuxian swallows hard. "Yes. Hanguang-jun can be trusted if...if anything happens today. Besides, we'll come back!" He takes Lan Sizhui's hand and squeezes it a little too tightly. "This isn't goodbye!"

Wen Qing swipes at her eyes and tosses him a pouch full of money. "Stop wasting time. Go."

Wei Wuxian turns to Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi with a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Come on," he says. "We'll need to walk fast if we want to reach Jinlintai in time for the celebration."

Lan Jingyi shoots Lan Sizhui an alarmed look as they follow Wei Wuxian past the wards of the Burial Mounds. "What was that about?" he mouths, wiggling his eyebrows.

Lan Sizhui shrugs. "Don't know," he mouths back. The lack of knowledge sits uneasily in his stomach. He's sure that Wen Qing had been referring to him, A-Yuan, but about what?

Wei Wuxian seems subdued as he leads Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui along the dusty road, although he tries to hide it by singing bawdy songs about beautiful women. Lan Sizhui's ears burn with embarrassment as he pretends not to understand. Lan Jingyi, on the other hand, makes no effort to hide his unholy delight, insisting that Wei Wuxian teach him some of the lyrics. To his credit, Wei Wuxian doesn't actually teach Lan Jingyi any lines with dirty words, but Lan Jingyi does learn enough to earn several hours of handstands should he ever dare to sing the lines in the Cloud Recesses.

Around sishi Wei Wuxian pulls them off the road to take a break. He leads Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui over to a nearby stream, where they clean their faces and hands, drink water, and share a late breakfast consisting of a cold, slightly burnt yam. Wei Wuxian only has a miniscule bite before passing it on to Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi and telling them to finish it.

"I'm not hungry," he assures them, snorting at Lan Jingyi's skeptical look. "You don't believe me?"

"No," Lan Jingyi answers.

"Ah, Lans! Always so honest." Wei Wuxian shakes his head, sighing ruefully as he kneels to examine the dust and dirt staining Lan Jingyi's white disciple robes. "I swear you Lans have some secret to keeping your clothes clean during travel, but you're probably too young to know what that is," he mutters, peering at Lan Jingyi's hems with quiet despair.

"The cleaning talisman has to be sewn in," Lan Jingyi says, not even pretending to be three years old anymore. "It'll take too long."

"We don't have the time or money to stop by a tailor anyway. If only Lan Zhan were here—" Wei Wuxian cuts himself off with a forlorn sigh. "Maybe that should be my next project, using resentful energy to do laundry with just a snap of my fingers! That would be nice, wouldn't it, A-Yuan? Then I could bury you in the radish patch as much as you wanted without Qing-jiejie yelling at me."

Lan Sizhui nods, his throat tight. The radish patch is one of the few memories that the fever didn't take, and even then, Lan Sizhui only had hazy, dreamlike flashes before Wei Wuxian and Wen Ning filled in the details.

"Aiyah, A-Yuan, why so much crying lately?" asks Wei Wuxian. "Are you hungry? Tired?"

Lan Sizhui quickly wipes his face with his sleeve. "I'm fine."

"Tch," Wei Wuxian sighs, "You've made your face all dirty again." He dips his hand into the stream and thumbs away the dirt as best he can, then holds out his arms. "Come on, I'll carry you. Jingyi, why don't you climb onto my back? That way your robes can't get even dirtier."

"I can walk," Lan Jingyi mutters, but he climbs on anyway, yawning and resting his head on Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

Wei Wuxian shifts his weight several times to find his balance, then stands up very slowly. "Ah," he gasps, winded. Lan Sizhui can feel the shaky movement of his breath. "Jingyi, you're heavy! What are they feeding you in Gusu?"

"Chicken," Lan Jingyi mumbles, blinking hard, and before Lan Sizhui can stop him, he falls asleep with a soft snore.

"Chicken," Wei Wuxian with a wistful smile. "A-Yuan. Have we treated you to chicken yet?"

Lan Sizhui hesitates, unsure how to respond. He knows meat was a special treat in the Burial Mounds, and he knows he had some the night that Hanguang-jun had visited and declined to stay. But other than that—

"Probably not," Wei Wuxian hums, as if he wasn't expecting Lan Sizhui to respond. He takes a step forward, frowning as Chenqing slips precariously toward the ground. He quickly

catches it and hands it to Lan Sizhui, who takes it with wide eyes. "A-Yuan, hold on to this for me, all right?"

"Mm!" Lan Sizhui nods, curling his wobbly toddler fingers tightly around the dizi.

"Good boy," Wei Wuxian smiles. "Don't chew on it today, all right? I'll need it later." He takes another careful step forward, one foot in front of the other until he finds a steady rhythm.

Lan Sizhui directs his energy into staying awake, afraid of being caught off guard once they reach Qiongqi Path, but his toddler body is exhausted from this morning's tantrum, and his eyes droop closed every few seconds no matter how hard he tries to keep them open. The fourth or fifth time he shakes himself awake, Wei Wuxian stops and looks at him, smiling fondly. "Go to sleep, silly boy," he whispers, shifting Lan Sizhui higher up on his hip. "You need your rest. I'll wake you and Jingyi when we reach Jinlintai."

"But—" Lan Sizhui's protest dies on his tongue as Wei Wuxian presses a kiss to the top of his head, and he hurriedly blinks back the hot tears gathering in his eyes. His voice warbles. "Xian-gege—"

"Shh, shh, don't cry. You can keep holding onto Chenqing, I'm not taking it away from you. Be a good boy and get some rest now."

Lan Sizhui swallows hard. "You have to be careful, Xian-gege," he says, his cheeks heating.

"Aiyah, don't worry about me," Wei Wuxian says with a small laugh. "I'm your senior, it's my job to worry about you!"

"You have to promise," Lan Sizhui pleads. "Please, Xian-gege, please."

"All right, all right, I promise," Wei Wuxian says, holding up three fingers and lifting them to his face. The movement jostles Lan Jingyi, who grumbles and clings more tightly. Wei Wuxian winces. "Your Xian-gege promises to be careful. Now listen to your elders and take your nap."

Lan Sizhui reluctantly closes his eyes, taking deep breaths to calm the nervous thumping of his heart. Between the sun, the heat, and the gentle rocking motion created by Wei Wuxian's slow stride, it's not long before he drifts off completely, listening to Wei Wuxian hum a familiar song that he's often heard on Hanguang-jun's qin.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warning for implied/referenced vomiting and mentions of bodily fluids.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jin Ling spends most of the morning with his father, held tight against his chest in a soft silk sling that one of the wetnurses helped Jin Zixuan fasten after breakfast. Jin Zixuan spends an entire *shichen* outside, sitting next to a familiar—but still small—lotus pond and meditating with slow, even breaths. The sound of his steady heartbeat lulls Jin Ling into a light doze, broken by Jin Zixuan's occasional murmurs about how much he loves Jiang Yanli, how he built this lotus pond for her so she'd have a little piece of her own home, and how Jin Ling's going to be the combination of both of their best qualities, strong and handsome with an eye for ambition like his father, yet gentle and flexible with a temperament like his mother's.

It's so much more than Jin Ling ever dreamed he would get. Besides Suihua and a memorial tablet, Jin Ling has nothing of his father's. His impression of the man comes entirely from stories told by xiao-shushu, who made out Jin Zixuan to be righteous, strong and distant (were those stories even real? Or true?); his late grandmother, who painted him as a spoiled child that grew up to be an honest man and would have made an excellent sect leader ("better than that scheming bastard who sits on the throne now," she'd say, mouth twisted in disgust); and Jiujiu, who described him as "a dumb peacock who never had the right words but loved your mother anyway and somehow managed to show it". There's a portrait of Jin Zixuan in Jin Ling's chambers and a memorial tablet on the ancestral altar which Jin Ling bows to every year during Qingming, but all of that means nothing in comparison to the living, breathing father he's with right now.

He doesn't care if this is all in his head, if he's stuck in some illusion, if he's suffering from a qi deviation—

Well, no. That's a lie. He *does* care about all that, it's just—he's so happy right now. His heart clenches painfully. When he wakes up from...whatever this is, will he return to his familiar, parentless life, where he's been thrust into a position as sect leader—and clan leader—that makes him feel like he's drowning? Where his last two living uncles are too hurt and too scared to reconcile with each other? Where the only solace he can find is regular correspondence from Ouyang Zizhen and the occasional night-hunt with Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi?

A distressed wail escapes him. He knows he'll have to give this up eventually, but he doesn't want to. Everything about his life has been out of his control, circumstances conspiring to take away his family members one by one while he could do nothing but be buffeted by betrayal and despair. He wants—he wants *this*, what he has right now, both his parents alive,

his jiujiu smiling and happy, his da-jiujiu being welcomed back into the fold. He wants it so badly he can hardly breathe. Guttural noises ring in his ears, and that's—is that *him*? Is he making those noises? Oh, that doesn't sound good—

"A-Ling, A-Ling," Jin Zixuan whispers frantically, unwrapping him from the sling and cradling him in his arm. "What's the matter? A-Ling?"

Jin Ling has never been good at stopping his own naturally occurring tantrums, always too worked up to do anything but let them run their course. Still, he makes his best effort now, squeezing his eyes shut to stem the flow of tears and trying to emulate the long, slow breaths that Lan Sizhui takes after finishing a night-hunt. It works, somewhat: the horrible gurgling screams coming out of his mouth devolve into wheezing grunts, and he forcefully wrestles his emotions back under his control. Through eyes still blurry with tears, he sees Jin Zixuan's face relax a little, and he feels a twinge of guilty relief: he hadn't intended to worry his father.

He wonders if he could do some adorable baby thing to bring the smile back onto Jin Zixuan's face. Maybe he could reach for Suihua? Or—

"Cousin! Fucking finally! What are you doing hiding out here?"

Jin Zixuan tenses, cradling Jin Ling's head protectively as he rises. Jin Ling squints, making out the face of an unfamiliar man dressed in Jin robes, the designs of which mark him as a member of the inner Jin family. Huh. This must be—

"Zixun!" Jin Zixuan hisses. "Don't curse in front of my son!"

Jin Zixun snorts. He's stocky and square-jawed, and though he's not unattractive, the contemptuous sneer on his face makes him look just as ugly as his character. Jin Ling hates him already.

"Meng Yao's been searching everywhere for you. Something about seating arrangements for that piece of trash who calls himself the Yiling Laozu?"

Jin Zixuan's face tightens. "You mean Wei Wuxian? That's my brother-in-law, Zixun, and he's our guest today. I expect you to treat him with respect."

"I'll give him the respect he deserves, which is none," Jin Zixun spits. Jin Ling's blood boils. Jin Zixun must see something on Jin Zixuan's face, because he sighs and rolls his eyes. "Fine! I won't cause trouble as long as he doesn't."

"I'm sure he won't," Jin Zixuan says, and Jin Ling blinks in surprise at the certainty in Jin Zixuan's tone. "One more thing, Zixun. You know as well as I do that Father legitimized A-Yao's place in our family; he's Jin Guangyao now—"

"Yes, yes, I know, that simpering whore's son never lets anyone forget it," Jin Zixun sneers, scratching his neck with obvious irritation. His cheeks are flushed. "He's not in the line of succession, though, so what does it matter? Anyway, he's in the Glamour Hall, flitting about adjusting decorations like some household mistress about to welcome her master. He's asked

for you over five times already, and I, being the *generous* person that I am, volunteered to look for you on his behalf. He should be thankful."

Jin Zixuan opens his mouth like he's about to say something, then shuts it with a resigned expression. "I'll go there now and see what he wants. I didn't intend to make him anxious."

"His feelings aren't your responsibility," Jin Zixun says with a snort. "Don't tell me that wife of yours is making you all sensitive and weak-willed like she is? I expected more from a child of the vaunted 'Violet Spider,' but I suppose all that rage went to Jiang Wanyin. Still, even he's all bark and no bite, like a toothless, cowering little puppy on the street. You should have seen him yesterday—"

"Zixun!" Jin Zixuan's heart is pounding; Jin Ling can hear it even through the multiple layers of his robes. "You brazen fool! Have you no shame? Do not insult my wife, and do not insult our allies!"

Jin Zixun takes a step backward, holding up his hands. He doesn't look the slightest bit remorseful. "I'm just saying—"

"Shut up," Jin Zixuan snaps.

Jin Zixun snaps his mouth shut, glaring sullenly at the lotus pond.

Jin Zixuan takes a deep breath, visibly trying to calm himself. "You can go now, Zixun. I'll find A-Yao in the Glamour Hall in a moment."

Jin Zixun tilts his chin up with a sneer. "Finally! I'm late for my own—" He huffs and scratches at his elbow, and the realization hits Jin Ling all at once: Jin Zixun is the Jin relative cursed with the Hundred Holes Curse by Su She. He must be late for the ambush at Qiongqi Path, the one that—oh, no. Oh no. A wave of panic rises in Jin Ling.

"You're late for something? For what?" Jin Zixuan frowns at him. "There's less than a *shichen* till the celebration begins. Don't tell me you're trying to sneak out to town now?"

"No!" Jin Zixun huffs, reaching a hand behind himself as he tries to scratch the middle of his back. His entire face is as red as the sugar-glazed tomato on a tanghulu. "I just have an errand to run."

"An errand—" Jin Zixuan tilts his head as Jin Zixun twitches here and there to scratch himself like a dancing monkey. "What's wrong with you? Do you need to see Lin-daifu?"

"I'm fine!" Jin Zixun insists. Jin Ling almost feels sorry for him, but then he says, "At least the baby's quiet now, huh? I heard him bawling when I was approaching. I'd kill to see Meng Yao's face if you carried a screaming brat into the Glamour Hall while he was trying to organize it!"

I'll show you a screaming brat, Jin Ling thinks furiously as Jin Zixun snorts at his own joke.

Jin Zixuan sighs. "Let's go." He looks like he wants to reprimand Jin Zixun again, but he doesn't, opting to rise from the bench and head toward the path leading out of the courtyard.

That's okay. Jin Ling can manage this one on his own. While Jin Zixun was running his mouth and insulting every single member of Jin Ling's family, Jin Ling had frantically been brainstorming how to take revenge. Ouyang Zizhen's latest letter had immediately come to mind:

Jin Rulan, I'm going to be candid with you. Here's my advice of the day: Don't underestimate just how much babies can vomit! Even now I'm still amazed at Yu-er's destructive capacity. I'm used to the usual amount of baby spit but this—! It stank even worse than the fierce corpses we encountered in Coffin Town, you recall, that trip with the corpse poisoning, where we met A-Qing, may she rest in peace, that beautiful soul—

I digress. Anyway, the full set of my robes had to be cleaned, every single piece, and would you believe—the next day, Yu-er did it all over again! At least there's no Discussion Conference coming up, otherwise I swear I'd have to attend naked! Can you imagine the face I'd lose...

Jin Ling's only been a baby for a day and a half, and now he understands what Ouyang Zizhen meant. He does indeed spit up on a regular basis, and occasionally he feels it turning into something more. Fortunately someone's always been there to burp him. But now? Well, bile's been rising his throat ever since Jin Zixun started talking, and Jin Zixuan's too distracted to check on him. There's only one course of action he can take.

Jin Ling waits Jin Zixuan gets him close enough to see the stitching on Jin Zixun's outer robe. Then he sucks in a huge breath, aims his mouth, and unleashes his fury all over the peonies decorating Jin Zixun's chest.

Lan Sizhui startles into wakefulness when he finds himself abruptly set onto the ground. Warm hands push him behind thick black robes next to a groggy, scowling Lan Jingyi, and Lan Sizhui has a fleeting moment of surprise at his de-aged body before remembering their situation.

"Wh—" Lan Jingyi starts, snapping his mouth shut when Lan Sizhui shakes his head sharply. Lan Jingyi frowns and reaches for Lan Sizhui's hand, squeezing it tightly, and Lan Sizhui takes a deep breath, grounding himself as he slowly lifts his gaze toward the sky.

Qiongqi Path looks much the same as it does in their time: a wide, dusty road sparsely populated with scrubby plants, rocks forming a border on either side. Above it sits an uneven ledge, half-formed from rocks and trees, flat enough to serve as a vantage point for a small group of people. On top of the ledge stands a line of Jin disciples, warily staring down at Wei Wuxian with their hands braced on their swords and bows. Behind them stand a few men in blue and white, forehead ribbons marking them as Lan outer disciples. Lan Sizhui's throat closes up, and he glances at Lan Jingyi, whose face is slowly morphing from shock to horror.

"Can I help you?" Wei Wuxian calls to the cultivators. He nudges Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi further behind him. "Are you here to escort me to Jinlintai? Make sure I arrive on time? I didn't think that the Chief Cultivator found me so important!"

The Jin disciples exchange uneasy glances, and the Lan avert their gaze. None of them utter a word.

"Well," Wei Wuxian says with a strained laugh, "If you don't mind, we'll just be on our way then." He places a hand on Chenqing, which has found its way back onto his belt, but he doesn't pull the dizi out to play. "Why don't you all head back to Jinlintai first? Tell Shi—tell Jin-shao-zongzhu and Jin-shao-furen that I'm on my way."

One of the Lan disciples clears his throat and steps forward. "Are those children?" he asks. Lan Sizhui doesn't recognize his face; judging by the confusion on Lan Jingyi's face, neither does he.

"Ah..." Wei Wuxian's voice trails off. He shifts uneasily. "It's a long story. Is Hanguang-jun with you?"

Before the Lan disciple can answer, an angry voice calls out, "Wei Wuxian!"

Wei Wuxian tenses, hand curling around Chenqing as a very disheveled Jin makes his way to the front. His hair is askew and falling out of his guan, and his robes bear a large stain illuminated clearly by the sunlight. The other cultivators look at him askance, and some of them bring their hands to their noses, grimacing as if they've smelled something rank.

"Wei Wuxian!" the man calls again. "You—" He cuts off with a furious huff, scratching uncontrollably at his chest, and Lan Sizhui's gut drops down to his toes as he realizes exactly who the man is. "Wei Wuxian!"

"Yes, that's me," Wei Wuxian says slowly. "Who are you?"

Jin Zixun's face darkens, transforming into an unflattering shade of red. "You don't recognize me?"

"Nope," Wei Wuxian answers. He frowns, wrinkling his nose as a light breeze wafts the faint but unmistakable scent of vomit toward them. "Anyway, I'd love to stop and have a chat, but the boys and I are running late and—"

"You're even kidnapping children to do your bidding now, Yiling Laozu?" Jin Zixun interrupts with a sneer.

Lan Jingyi pops out from behind Wei Wuxian before Lan Sizhui can stop him, and the Lan disciples on the ledge take a collective gasp. "We weren't kidnapped!" Lan Jingyi snaps. "Wei-qianbei rescued us!"

Lan Sizhui edges out from behind Wei Wuxian, thinking quickly as Wei Wuxian tucks him close. "That's right!" he calls in his best baby voice. "Xian-gege rescued us from the bad men!" A spark of inspiration hits as he recalls what happened the first time Wei Wuxian entered Qiongqi Path. A toddler wouldn't have a teen's logic, anyway, so the jump isn't even that strange. "He rescued us from the bad men who looked like you! They were hurting my *popo* and beating her, and they wore gold too!"

The Lan disciples look down shamefacedly, and some of the Jin disciples exchange guilty looks.

"I don't care what lies these brats are spouting," Jin Zixun huffs. "Wei Wuxian, you've obviously brainwashed them!"

"We're not brainwashed!" Lan Jingyi shouts, stamping his foot. "And you smell like puke!"

Lan Sizhui barely manages to hold in a hysterical laugh. Some of the Jin and Lan on the ledge do not.

Jin Zixun puffs up with rage and embarrassment. "I don't have time for this. I demand you remove the curse!"

Wei Wuxian rolls his eyes. "What curse? I haven't cursed anyone. I don't even know you!"

"Don't deny it!" Jin Zixun snarls. "You cast it on me as revenge!"

"I've already taken all the revenge that I wish to take," Wei Wuxian mutters, though not loudly enough for Jin Zixun to hear. Despite his calm demeanor, his hand is shaking, and Lan Sizhui can sense the resentful energy gathering around him like a thunderstorm. Lan Sizhui looks around desperately. Where is Hanguang-jun? Did he not receive Wei Wuxian's letter? Did he receive it too late? There's only so much Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi can do, and if Su She is indeed hiding out with a dizi to frame Wei Wuxian—

Lan Sizhui gasps. The dizi. If Wei Wuxian doesn't play Chenqing, then he can't be framed for whatever happens next!

Lan Sizhui quickly refocuses his attention. Jin Zixun and Wei Wuxian are still trading barbs, and the situation appears to be escalating.

"You're trying to torture me to death!" Jin Zixun insists, scratching at himself like a crazed monkey. "Just admit it!"

"I really, *really* do not know what you're talking about," Wei Wuxian says, twirling Chenqing like a casual threat. "I have so many better things to do with my time than cast curses on people from afar, especially if I can't even remember their names." Wei Wuxian scoffs. "Honestly! If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead already. I'm very efficient."

"You're going to deny it even now?" Jin Zixun yells. "How can you deny this!" He rips open the front of his robes, exposing his chest to the air. It's covered with gaping sores, and the Jin and Lan disciples on the ledge recoil in poorly hidden disgust. "This is your fault!"

Wei Wuxian raises an eyebrow. "The Hundred Holes Curse rebounds on its own caster! Why would I subject myself to such a thing?" He snorts. "I'd show you my own chest, but that would be improper, and that would also just make it easier for you to kill me. You!" he barks, and the cultivator next to Jin Zixun jumps. "I see you getting ready to shoot me! Your form's improper, but good try!"

The archer flushes bright red and lowers his bow.

Jin Zixun screams in frustration and draws his sword, preparing to jump down to the path.

Wei Wuxian lifts Chenqing to his lips, and Lan Sizhui doesn't even think. He snatches the dizi from Wei Wuxian's hands and sticks it his mouth, slobbering and gnawing on it like a dog with a bone.

"A-Yuan!" Wei Wuxian gasps as a screechy melody floats into the air. It carries the unmistakable timbre of a dizi. Wei Wuxian's jaw drops open. He cuts a glance at Lan Sizhui, then whirls around, trying to trace the source of the music. "What the—that's not me! Where is that coming from?"

"You—you've obviously taught the brat how to do your wicked tricks!" Jin Zixun blusters from where he's still on the ledge, sword hanging uncertainly in the air. Several of the other cultivators cast him looks of disbelief, then turn their attention back to the show on the ground. To Lan Sizhui's relief, none of them are reaching for their swords or other weapons. Instead, they look equal parts confused and entertained.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Wei Wuxian shouts at Jin Zixun. "A-Yuan's not playing the dizi, he's practically eating it!" He makes a grab for Chenqing, but Lan Jingyi darts in front of him and gets underfoot, blocking him with his arms stretched wide. "Little Lan," Wei Wuxian pants, "this is not a game! I need that dizi!"

"No!" Lan Jingyi cries. "You can't have it!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes narrow, and his fists clench at his sides. "Lan Jingyi, you little—" His next words don't make it out of his mouth, because at that moment Wen Ning comes crashing out of the woods, cutting a line through the cultivators and knocking Jin Zixun over as he makes a beeline toward Wei Wuxian.

Wen Ning stumbles down slipshod from the ledge to the road. His eyes are black, irises not visible even in the sunlight, and there's not a hint of recognition on his face as he approaches, lurching like a puppet on a string. The music is louder now, clearly originating from the trees behind the cultivators on the ledge, but everyone is too distracted by Wen Ning to even look.

None of them seem inclined to help, Lan Sizhui realizes with a sudden, shocking bitterness.

"Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian calls, hand reaching fruitlessly for his belt. He takes a shaky breath, then extends his hand backwards, wiggling his fingers, keeping his eyes fixed on Wen Ning. "A-Yuan. Give me the dizi *now*."

Lan Sizhui hastens to take the dizi out of his mouth, making a futile attempt to clean it with his robes before passing it over. It slips out of his hand, too wet with his copious drool and too heavy for his toddler fingers, falling to the ground with a thud.

"Shit," Lan Jingyi curses, hurriedly reaching for the dizi, but it too eludes his grasp, dropping uselessly to the ground.

"A-Yuan! Lan Jingyi! *Now*!" Wei Wuxian barks. Wen Ning's standing in front of him now, wrapping a hand around his throat like he's about to choke him.

"Xian-gege," Lan Sizhui cries, his voice thick with tears. Lan Jingyi has also started crying. "Hold on, hold on—" Both of them reach for Chenqing, each of them taking one end and lifting it up in the air. "Here—"

And then, quite suddenly, three things happen in rapid succession:

The music stops.

Wen Ning drops his arm to his side.

And Hanguang-jun comes flying out of the treetops atop Bichen, holding an unconscious Su She by the scruff of his neck. In Su She's hand is a pale green bamboo dizi, still leaking incriminating wisps of resentful energy from its most recent use.

"Wei Ying," Hanguang-jun calls as the blankness on Wen Ning's face morphs into confusion. He swiftly lands next to Wei Wuxian, dumping Su She onto the ground without an ounce of consideration. He pointedly ignores the hushed greetings of the cultivators on the ledge, turning all his attention to Wei Wuxian. "Wei Ying. Are you all right?"

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian utters, eyes round. He opens his mouth, then closes it, shaking his head. His face is pale, and he's trembling all over, his breath coming in small gasps. "You're here."

"Yes," Hanguang-jun says softly, curling his hand around Wei Wuxian's wrist. "Wei Ying. I'm here. It's all right."

Wei Wuxian takes a shuddering breath and clutches Hanguang-jun's wrist. "Lan Zhan. It wasn't me. I wasn't playing."

"W-Wei-gongzi?" Wen Ning asks. "What's going on?" He blinks, looking around slowly, and gasps softly when he spots Su She. "That—he—"

Wei Wuxian frowns, looking down at Su She's prone form. "Who is this?"

"That's Su She!" Lan Jingyi calls. He and Lan Sizhui are still holding Chenqing between them, and together they rush over, finally handing over the dizi. It's covered in an impressive layer of congealed road dust and dried saliva, and Wei Wuxian grimaces as he examines it.

"Look how dirty you made Chenqing!" He tries to rub off some of the grime with the hem of his sleeve, but only succeeds in spreading it further. "Aiyah!"

"Ning-gege!" Lan Jingyi exclaims with a wave.

"Ning-shushu," Lan Sizhui greets, and on impulse, he wraps himself around Wen Ning's leg. Hot tears rush to his eyes, and he buries his face in Wen Ning's rough, dusty robes.

"I'm glad to see that you and Jingyi are all right," Wen Ning says, patting Lan Sizhui's head. He gently pries Lan Sizhui off his leg, glancing up at the cultivators above them before turning a worried gaze onto Wei Wuxian. "Wei-gongzi, H-Hanguang-jun, maybe I should—"

"Just what on earth is going on here?!"

Jin Zixuan flies down onto the path and lands right in front of Wei Wuxian, looking extremely windswept and harried. He barely manages not to step on Su She as he dismounts his sword. "Wei Wuxian, Hanguang-jun. Wen—Qionglin? Zixun! What is going on? Are those—are those children?"

Hanguang-jun turns to face Jin Zixuan, moving purposefully in front of Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian, Lan Jingyi, and Lan Sizhui. He says calmly, "It appears Jin Zixun and Su She"—he looks pointedly at the man on the ground—"set up an ambush for Wei Wuxian. I caught Su She playing the dizi, using resentful energy to control Wen Qionglin, trying to force him to kill Wei Wuxian. It appears your cousin also prepared a small group of disciples to attack Wei Wuxian as he, A-Yuan, and Lan Jingyi passed through here."

"That's a lie!" Jin Zixun huffs, flying down to the path and positioning himself behind Jin Zixuan.

"Is it?" Hanguang-jun asks, side-eying Jin Zixun with a glance that screams of judgment. His eyes zero in on the Lan disciples hiding behind the Jins, and his gaze turns frosty. "Lan Xiaoming. Zhang Heming. Chen Mingqian. Xie Minghao. Yang Kailin. Liu Changwei. Explain yourselves."

The Lan disciple who asked Wei Wuxian about the children steps forward, bowing deeply. "Hanguang-jun, Jin Zixun asked us to accompany him when he met with Wei Wuxian here at Qiongg Path. He insisted that Wei Wuxian had cursed him and feared retribution should he go alone."

"Alone?" Hanguang-jun echoes. He lets the word hang in the air as his eye scans the many Jin disciples standing on the path. Lan Sizhui didn't have a chance to take a close look before, but there are approximately twenty of them.

"The Yiling Laozu is so powerful," Jin Zixun says with a sneer. "Who knows what kind of evil he could cook up! Clearly he already has a grudge against me! Just look at the state of my chest!"

Jin Zixuan takes a deep breath, visibly steeling himself to respond. Lan Sizhui doesn't think he's ever seen a person look so uncomfortable.

Wei Wuxian gets there first.

"For the *last* time, I didn't curse you!" Wei Wuxian shouts, exasperated. He reaches for his sash, loosening it with furious, jerky movements. "Everyone calls me shameless. Why don't I show you exactly how shameless I am! I'll strip right now so you all can see that I'm innocent!"

"Wei Ying!" Hanguang-jun roars, whirling and grabbing Wei Wuxian's wrists with both hands. His eyes are wide, and the tips of his ears are bright red. "Don't."

"Lan Zhan, this Jin person doesn't believe me, how else am I supposed to get him off my back?"

"Wei Ying—"

"You're guilty," Jin Zixun taunts. "If you had nothing to hide, then why didn't you just show us right away?"

"Maybe because someone decided to *ambush* me, you fucking—"

"Wei Wuxian, this isn't necessary, please don't—" Jin Zixuan looks like he wants to sink into the ground. "Zixun, don't say another word—"

"Too late, Peacock! Lan Zhan, let me *go*—" Wei Wuxian wriggles against Hanguang-jun's grip, his face flushing.

The flush on Hanguang-jun's ears is spreading to his face. He sounds breathless. "Wei Ying, *stop*—"

"*Lan Zhan*—"

Just as Wei Wuxian manages to free himself from Hanguang-jun's hold, Lan Jingyi shoots forward, quick as a fox, and stomps his foot hard enough to rattle some little rocks off the ledge. "Su She did it!" he screams at the top of his lungs.

Silence falls.

"Who's Su She?" one of the Jin archers asks, and a Lan disciple gestures toward Su She's prone form.

"Su-zongzhu?" Jin Zixuan asks in disbelief, frowning down at the man on the ground. "But why?"

"I don't even know him!" Jin Zixun protests.

"I don't know him either!" Wei Wuxian exclaims.

The man in question begins to stir. Hanguang-jun draws Bichen and points it at Su She's chest, tracking every single twitch of Su She's eyelids as they flutter open. The hatred in his glare is almost as strong as Jiang-zongzhu's whenever he sees Hanguang-jun at night-hunts or discussion conferences.

"Wh—" Confusion flashes across Su She's face for a moment before it's replaced by an arrogant sneer. "Hanguang-jun! You attacked me for no reason, and now you're threatening me just as I wake up! I expected better from a so-called paragon of righteousness!"

"Strip," Hanguang-jun orders.

Su She's face turns a blotchy, ugly red. "How dare you!" he spits. "I will not! You think you can bully me just because you're a Twin Jade of Lan? I am a *sect leader*!"

"You are a traitor," Hanguang-jun states in a low voice filled with disgust, "and a shameful stain on the Lan sect, who gave you an opportunity for an unparalleled education that you wasted—"

Su She's fists clench at his sides. "Hanguang-jun, you'd better watch your words—"

"All right!" Jin Zixuan says with a loud cough. "Did everyone forget that we are all meant to be celebrating my son's hundredth day today? Let us all return to Jinlintai, where we can resolve this situation in a more appropriate manner." When no one moves, he sighs and says, "Hanguang-jun, if you could please...?"

Hanguang-jun uses Bichen's tip to roll the dizi out of Su She's lap and toward his own feet. He pockets the dizi, then very, very slowly withdraws Bichen and sheathes it. Su She shoots up as soon as he's clear of the blade, his face twisted by an ugly snarl.

"I expected more courteous treatment from the illustrious *Hanguang-jun*," he mutters bitterly, but when he spots Hanguang-jun twitching his fingers like he's about to cast the Lan silencing spell, he shuts up with a mutinous glare.

"Zixun, you come with me, and please—close your robes," Jin Zixuan commands, straightening his shoulders and lifting his chin. "All the rest of the Jin sect disciples are to follow me as well."

Jin Zixun scowls and does as told. He's still glaring at Wei Wuxian, but it appears he finally has the sense to keep his mouth shut.

Jin Zixuan turns to Hanguang-jun. "Hanguang-jun, will you and the other Lan disciples escort Su-zongzhu to Jinlintai?"

Hanguang-jun nods. He motions to the Lan disciples, and they hurriedly fly down onto the path, huddling together next to Su She. "Zhang Heming," Hanguang-jun says, and the man who's done all the talking so far step forward. "Please take the other disciples and accompany this man to Jinlintai." Hanguang-jun tilts his head toward Su She, who bristles at the obvious lack of address. Hanguang-jun ignores it. "Ensure that he remains there in your custody, excuse me, your *company*, until I arrive. I will take care of Wei Ying, A-Yuan, Lan Jingyi, and Wen Qionglin, then meet you there."

"Yes, Hanguang-jun," Zhang Heming says, bowing. The other Lan disciples follow suit, then fly up into the air, circling around Su She so that he's surrounded on all sides.

"We will also take our leave now," Jin Zixuan says. "I'll initiate a full investigation when we all reunite at Jinlintai. And—" He takes a deep breath and lets it out. "Wei Wuxian. You have my word that you and anyone in your company will reach Jinlintai safely, and that you will not be harmed during your visit there. A-Li is—she is very excited to see you. I made a vow to make her happy, to—to reunite you today, and I won't break it."

Wei Wuxian swallows hard. "Jin Zixuan. Thank you."

Jin Zixuan nods. He bows to Hanguang-jun, nods at Wen Ning, and then takes off on Suihua. Jin Zixun and the other Jin disciples don't bother with a farewell, quickly mounting their swords and disappearing into the sky.

Hanguang-jun lets out a long breath, his shoulders relaxing, and finally turns to face them again. "Wei Ying. Are you all right?"

Wei Wuxian lets out a hysterical laugh. "I'm—yes. I'm fine, Lan Zhan. I'm fine." He covers his face with his hands, trying and failing to hide the tears trickling down his face. Lan Sizhui hurries over to his side and hugs his leg, and Lan Jingyi quickly follows suit. Hanguang-jun gently takes Wei Wuxian's wrist again, rubbing a soothing circle along his pulse point while Wen Ning presses a clean handkerchief into Wei Wuxian's palm.

"Ah, how embarrassing," Wei Wuxian mutters in a thick voice. He sniffles a few times, then hastily wipes at his eyes and clears his throat. His smile is small but genuine. "Lan Zhan, it's a good thing you're here! I was worried we wouldn't make it in time, but now you can fly us all to Jinlintai!"

Hanguang-jun's eyes soften. "Of course. I would not want you to miss your nephew's celebration." He kneels down in front of Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui, carefully checking their meridians and brushing some dirt off their robes. "How are you both feeling?"

Lan Jingyi folds himself into a clumsy bow. "I'm all right, Hanguang-jun. I'm glad you're here!"

"I'm fine, Rich-gege," Lan Sizhui says, remembering the nickname at the last second.

"Mn. Jingyi, I sent a letter to your parents, asking them to come to Jinlintai so they can escort you back home."

Lan Jingyi shoots Lan Sizhui a panicked look. "Oh. That's—good?"

Hanguang-jun looks between them, a tiny furrow appearing in his brow. "Wei Ying said he found you both near the Burial Mounds, but I am unclear as to how you ended up there. Regardless, I am glad you are both safe and well."

Lan Sizhui hesitates for a moment, then wraps himself Hanguang-jun's leg, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, Rich-gege." He peeks up at Wei Wuxian, who's watching them with a soft smile. "Thank you for helping Xian-gege."

"I am always happy for the chance to help Wei Ying," Hanguang-jun murmurs.

Wei Wuxian blushes and coughs, busying himself with sticking Chenqing back into his belt. "Lan Zhan, you are too good sometimes." He takes a sharp breath. "Well! Shall we all head to Jinlintai and meet my nephew? I still need to deliver my gift!"

"Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning says timidly.

"Hm?"

"I—I think I should go back to the Burial Mounds. I'll only bring you trouble if I come to Jinlintai."

Wei Wuxian regards Wen Ning intently. "Is that what you think is best?"

Wen Ning nods quickly. "Mn. Jie's probably going out of her mind with worry. And—" Wen Ning lowers his head. "I'm sorry."

"What? What are you sorry for?"

"I followed you even though I wasn't supposed to," Wen Ning mumbles. "I was so worried about you and A-Yuan and Jingyi—I, I should have known someone would take advantage."

Wei Wuxian swallows hard, guilt creeping across his face. "It's all right, Wen Ning. Things turned out all right."

"Should I take A-Yuan?" Wen Ning asks. "If they find out where he's from, it—it wouldn't be good. It's dangerous for him to be there."

"I want to go with Jingyi," Lan Sizhui says, panicked, and he grabs Lan Jingyi's hand. "I want to meet Jin Ling. Xian-gege, you promised!"

"Ah—" Wei Wuxian winces. "A-Yuan—"

"Xian-gege!" Lan Sizhui takes a deep breath, readying himself for another tantrum. "Please!"

"Wei Ying," Hanguang-jun says, waiting until Wei Wuxian has met his eyes before he continues. "I will make sure nothing happens to A-Yuan, or to Jingyi, or to you. You have my word."

Wei Wuxian's throat works for a long moment. "All right," he breathes. "All right. A-Yuan can go."

Wen Ning smiles sadly. "I'll head back now."

"Do you have your emergency talisman with you?" Wei Wuxian asks.

"Yes." Wen Ning pats his chest. "A-Yuan, be good for your Xian-gege. Goodbye, Jingyi, goodbye, Hanguang-jun, and—and thank you for helping us."

"Goodbye, Wen Qionglin," Hanguang-jun says with a nod. "Have a safe journey home."

Wen Ning bows deeply, then turns and walks away down the path. Lan Sizhui's heart aches as he disappears around the corner. He knows that Wen Ning can defend himself, and that Wen Ning survives well into the future, but the farewell still feels final in a way Lan Sizhui can't quite describe.

"Ready to go?" Hanguang-jun asks, glancing at Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui before turning his attention to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian nods. He picks Lan Sizhui up, tucks him under his outer robe, and secures him to his chest using the binding-bonding talisman in lieu of a physical sling. After a moment of consideration, Hanguang-jun does the same with Lan Jingyi. Lan Sizhui tucks himself against Wei Wuxian's torso, throwing his arms over Wei Wuxian's shoulders and nestling his head so that it rests against his chest, and Lan Jingyi follows his example. His eyes are wide with a mixture of delight and fear at his proximity to Hanguang-jun.

"Hold on tight, A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian murmurs, and he carefully steps onto Bichen next to Hanguang-jun. Hanguang-jun, ears red, wraps an arm around Wei Wuxian's waist, and Wei Wuxian flushes, his heart thudding so rapidly Lan Sizhui can practically feel it vibrating.

"On three," Hanguang-jun says, and he counts down slowly before lifting them up into the sky.

Adrenaline spikes in Lan Sizhui's blood. *We did it, he realizes, we did it. We changed the future.* Jin Zixuan is alive. Jin Ling won't be an orphan. Wen Ning and Wei Wuxian aren't fugitives, and the Wens—his *family*—can live in relative peace. Lan Sizhui's breath catches in his throat. *I can have a family. I can grow up with popo and Uncle Four and Wen Ning and Wen Qing—*

Elation rushes through him, making the rest of the world fall away. For a long while, he basks in the idea of growing up with his own surname, his own kin; of not feeling displaced from his own history; of—

Lan Sizhui frowns, suddenly struck by a stark realization. Up until this point, he's known exactly how events played out in the past, and with Lan Jingyi's help, he's deliberately taken action to prevent certain things from happening. But now? Now he's in uncharted territory. All the hatred that destroyed his family—and Jin Ling's—is still fermenting under the polite veneer of the cultivation world.

He clings to Wei Wuxian more tightly, feeling tiny and vulnerable as sorrow tempers his earlier all-consuming joy. If his memories and mind stay as they are, he'll never get to experience this wonderful new world with the hopeful innocence his actual toddler self deserves. Time and time again he's seen how easily hatred, jealousy, and resentment can poison the well, leaving people unable to defend themselves regardless of their involvement in a situation. And he knows—from watching Hanguang-jun interact with Jiang-zongzhu and some of the Lan elders—that some wounds simply run too deep to ever heal. His own soul bears scars from his early childhood that he'll never be able to remove, no matter how much they've been smoothed by the passage of time.

Still—perhaps he can allow himself to experience this little bit of happiness. No matter what happens at Jinlintai, he'll always have the knowledge that he's kept his family safe and well for just a little bit longer—and stopped a series of tragedies that ended in thousands of deaths. That's enough to go on, he thinks, and he lets that thought pull him into a doze as he listens to the muted roar of the wind.

I hope this chapter tides you over for the weekend!! The next chapter will be up on Monday. I'm super excited to hear what everyone thinks about this one, so please, feel free to let me know in the form of a comment, gif, emoji, kudos, or message on tumblr or twitter!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments! I hope you enjoy this Jiang family reunion ❤️

Jin Ling is panicking and there's nothing he can do about it.

He stares at the rattle drum Jiang Yanli is waving in front of him, counting the beats mindlessly as he tries to sort through his thoughts. Jin Zixun had rushed off after Jin Ling spectacularly ruined his robes, and at first Jin Ling had thought he'd succeeded in preventing him from going to Qiongqi Path, but it turns out he'd only managed to delay it. Jin Guangyao had then kept Jin Zixun occupied for many long, boring minutes finalizing the seating arrangement for Wei Wuxian. In the end, Wei Wuxian had finally been placed at the very end of the hall next to the door, and, to add further insult, had been sequestered from the other guests by a partition.

"His Excellency will be pleased," Jin Guangyao said when they finally finished. His facial expression was carefully neutral as he rolled up the seating chart. "Zixun, do you agree?"

Jin Zixun frowned. "A-Li won't like it, but it's the best we can do." He hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath. "A-Yao... Zixun was acting strangely earlier and told me he had to rush off for a mysterious errand. Do you know anything about this?"

Jin Guangyao's eyes widened. "An errand? So close to the start of the celebration?"

"That's what I told him," Jin Zixun said, nodding. "He was very cagey about it."

Jin Guangyao let out a considering hum, brow furrowing with just the right amount of depth as he pretended to think it over. Several seconds passed, and then Jin Guangyao's face fell, and he sucked in sharp breath, meeting Jin Zixun's gaze with eyes full of anguish. "Zixun, I know where he is. I advised him not to do this, I begged him, but—you know how headstrong he can be."

"What do you mean?" Jin Zixun asked, voice rising. "A-Yao. What is he going to do?"

Jin Guangyao swallowed convulsively, his lips trembling. "He—he wanted to intercept Wei Wuxian at Qiongqi Path. He was convinced that Wei Wuxian had cast a curse upon him and was going to demand that Wei Wuxian remove it. And if Wei Wuxian denied it, or refused, then..." His voice trailed off, and he let the implications hang in the air unspoken.

"Fuck," Jin Zixun breathed. "Fuck! This is bad. I need to—" He exhaled sharply and looked down at Jin Ling, who was still strapped to his chest. "I need to find A-Li and give her A-Ling, then I need to go after Zixun. I promised A-Li that Wei Wuxian would be able to come,

and—and I can still keep that promise. A-Yao, can you keep everyone occupied until I come back? Move the start of the celebration if you must. You have my permission. If Father protests, I'll take responsibility."

"Of course, Zixuan. I'll do what I can."

"Thank you, A-Yao."

Jin Zixuan rushed off before Jin Ling could even catch a glimpse of Jin Guangyao's reaction.

Now, Jin Ling is here, nestled in his mother's arms while Jiujiu paces back and forth in front of them. "What's taking them so long?" Jiujiu gripes, Zidian sparking at his wrist. His cape swishes behind him with each step. "It's been half a shichen already! I should've known that Jin Zixun would cause trouble after what happened yesterday—and Wei Wuxian isn't any good at getting himself out of trouble, only into it—" He lets out a short, sharp breath, rubbing the heel of his palm against his forehead. "A-Li, you said Hanguang-jun came to see you this morning, right? Did he say he was going to Qiongqi Path?"

"He said he received a letter from A-Xian about something strange that happened at the Burial Mounds," Jiang Yanli responds, her eyes worried. "Hanguang-jun wouldn't let anything happen to A-Xian, would he?"

Jiujiu sighs heavily. "No, he wouldn't, but there's no guarantee that they're actually traveling together—"

"Jin-shao-furen!" A servant comes running in, bowing hastily. "Jin-shao-furen, Jiang-zongzhu! Hanguang-jun and the Yi—um, Wei-gongzi are here."

Jiujiu whirls around. Jiang Yanli gasps and rushes forward, meeting Wei Wuxian halfway as he strolls into the hall with Hanguang-jun at his side. For a moment Jin Ling feels like he's been transported in time, watching the pair approach with the same matching stride and contrasting outfits he's seen at countless discussion conferences and official sect visits. Their hairstyles and robe designs aren't as elaborate, and there's a simmering tension between them instead of the easy comfort Jin Ling's accustomed to, but it's close enough that Jin Ling still feels hyperaware of his own displacement in time.

It takes Jin Ling a long moment to realize that there are two other people with Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian—though in his defense, they weren't in his line of sight and it wasn't like he could just move himself.

"This is Lan Jingyi," says Hanguang-jun after everyone's finished the requisite bows. He holds up a chubby toddler wearing a tiny, crooked Lan forehead ribbon, dressed in robes that are more dirt-colored than white. Lan Jingyi's eyes widen when he spots Jin Ling, and he opens his mouth to say something, but Hanguang-jun sets him back down before he can get his words out.

"And this is A-Yuan!" Wei Wuxian announces, holding up a toddler in cream-colored robes covered in road dust. He looks a little cleaner than Lan Jingyi. A-Yuan—it must be Lan

Sizhui, or Lan Yuan, or is he Wen Yuan here?—immediately sets his gaze upon Jin Ling, recognition sparking in his eyes.

Jin Ling's heart pounds. Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi must have been transported back too, and they must have found a way to come to Jinlintai so that they could reunite with him.

Jiujiu frowns as he looks between the two children. "What are these children doing here?"

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli chides.

"It's an honest question!" Jiujiu protests. "Why did you bring them here?"

Wei Wuxian sighs. "Aiyah, Jiang Cheng, it's a long story. Can I at least greet my nephew first?"

"Fine," Jiujiu grouses and rolls his eyes.

Wei Wuxian sets Lan Sizhui down and skips over to Jin Ling and Jiang Yanli with a glowing smile. "Hello, A-Ling," he says, reaching a finger out. Jin Ling grasps it, and Wei Wuxian's smile gets bigger, lighting up his whole face. "You're the handsomest baby in the whole world. Grow up to be like your mother, all right? Don't take anything from your father except for the good parts."

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli says with a laugh.

"I'm joking, I'm joking. Be filial to both your parents, A-Ling. Oh, and try to take after your namesake! Lan Zhan is right over there, see? I named you after him, Jin Rulan. He's—he's so good. The best, after your mother."

Jiang Yanli smiles. Her eyes are bright with happy tears. "Would you like to hold him, A-Xian? A-Cheng's had his turn plenty of times."

"Yes," Wei Wuxian breathes, holding out his arms.

Jiang Yanli carefully transfers Jin Ling over, and Wei Wuxian immediately adjusts his arms so that they support Jin Ling's head and body. "A-Ling," he murmurs, his voice thick, "A-Ling, A-Ling. I'm so glad that I'm getting to meet you." He walks over to Hanguang-jun, who's looking at Wei Wuxian with a sickening amount of longing that Jin Ling recognizes from watching the two dance around each other prior to their marriage. "Lan Zhan! Meet my nephew."

"Mn," Hanguang-jun says. "Jin Rulan. You are very handsome." He's looking at Wei Wuxian as he says it, and Jin Ling's tempted to throw up on him just to make him stop. On the floor, Lan Jingyi sighs with an exasperated eyeroll, while Lan Sizhui averts his gaze with a half-embarrassed smile. Fortunately, Jin Zixuan returns at that moment and turns everyone's attention to him, so Jin Ling doesn't have to take such drastic action.

"Oh, good!" Jin Zixuan says. "Wei Wuxian, Hanguang-jun...and kids. A-Yao told me you'd arrived."

Wei Wuxian hands Jin Ling back to Jiang Yanli and bows deeply. "Jin-shao-zongzhu. Thank you for your assistance at Qiongqi Path, and for allowing me to be here."

Jin Zixuan flushes. "You're welcome."

"Where are Su She and Jin Zixun?" Hanguang-jun asks.

Jin Zixuan lets out a long sigh. "They're in their quarters." He holds up a hand when Hanguang-jun bristles like an angry cat. "I tasked some trusted disciples to guard their doors and escort them here for the celebration. Neither of them will be going anywhere until then. The Jin and Lan disciples who were at Qiongqi Path are also being confined. I also informed Zewu-jun of the Lan disciples' involvement."

Hanguang-jun's shoulders relax a fraction. "Thank you."

Jin Ling's head spins, and he quickly searches the room for Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi, who are exchanging satisfied smirks that look very odd on their toddler faces. He makes a mental note to thank them once he has his verbal ability back.

Jin Zixuan clears his throat, sucking his breath in through his nose. "Wei Wuxian. Did you bring a gift for Jin Ling?"

"Yes," Wei Wuxian answers warily. "Why?"

"Um, I was thinking on the way here—"

"Don't say it," Jiujiu mutters, elbowing Wei Wuxian when he raises his eyebrows and opens his mouth.

"I wasn't going to say anything!" Wei Wuxian hisses.

Jin Zixuan closes his eyes in exasperation and clenches his jaw, visibly gathering his patience. "Wei Wuxian," he tries again, "I was thinking that it would be better if you did not present the gift during the formal ceremony. It would be best if you gave Jin Ling his gift in private. Now, in fact, is the perfect time."

"Is Wei Ying not allowed to participate in the ceremony? He was invited here just like everyone else," Lan Wangji says with an icy glare.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian mutters, "It's okay."

"Hanguang-jun, please do not misunderstand." Jin Zixuan says, and his mouth turns down into a slight frown. For a second he looks very young and vulnerable. He looks around the hall three times, searching the empty corners, then says in a low tone, "I am afraid some of the other guests may accuse Wei Wuxian of, um, trying to corrupt A-Ling with his gift, and I am afraid of how quickly things may escalate afterward."

Jiujiu scowls, fists clenching at his sides. "You think they would dare?"

Jin Zixuan blows out a breath. "I think it would only take a few drops of alcohol and one provocative comment to start an uproar." He winces and meets Wei Wuxian's eyes. "For what it's worth, I am sorry. And if—if you feel that it's important for you to present your gift during the formal ceremony, then I will ensure that it happens and do my best to manage whatever situation arises afterward."

Wei Wuxian swallows and brushes his thumb against the top of Jin Ling's head. He laughs weakly. "When have I ever cared about formality? It's more important for A-Ling to receive my gift. If this is the best way, then it is what it is." Before anyone can attempt to comfort him, he reaches into his robes and pulls out a small box, glancing at Jin Zixuan, then at Jiang Yanli. "May I?"

"Please, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli says.

Jin Zixuan comes to Jiang Yanli's side as Jiujiu and Hanguang-jun exchange a glance that is surprisingly free of its usual vitriol. Of course—they must not hate each other yet, since Wei Wuxian is still alive and they can't blame each other for his death. Jin Ling blinks in surprise as the two of them move in concert to flank Wei Wuxian, turning to face the door with their hands on their swords. Jin Ling's left with a view of their broad backs, their hair, and nothing else. Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui also disappear from Jin Ling's sight as they move to stand next to Wei Wuxian.

Jin Ling turns his attention back to Wei Wuxian, who takes a deep breath and bows his head. "Jin-shao-zongzhu, Jin-shao-furen, Wei-mouren humbly presents this gift to your son, Jin Rulan. 健康活潑，耳聰目明 ([May he be] healthy, lively, and perceptive)."

"Thank you, Wei-gongzi. We are honored to accept your gift," Jin Zixuan says with a nod.

Wei Wuxian lifts out of his bow, a small smile lighting his face as he opens the box. Jin Ling catches a glimpse of red cloth, and then a silver bell is being dangled above his chest, the ends of a red tassel tickling his fingers while a white jade pendant swings within his eyeline. It takes Jin Ling a moment to recognize the familiar, nine-petaled lotus carved on the body of the bell. It's the clan symbol of the Jiang.

"A-Ling," Wei Wuxian says, "as long as you wear this Clarity Bell, you'll be protected from all low-level fae, demons, ghosts, or monsters. They won't even be able to get close to you. I—I hope that this protection serves you for the rest of your life, even when I'm not able."

Oh, Jin Ling thinks, pain shooting through his heart. He'd never received this bell in his first life; he's sure someone would have mentioned its existence at some point. It seems so obvious when he thinks about it. If Wei Wuxian never made it past Qionqiong Path the first time, then his gift wouldn't have either.

Well, Jin Ling's not going to let the chance pass him by again. He makes an impatient noise and makes grabby hands for the bell, and Wei Wuxian beams, setting the bell on Jin Ling's chest. Jin Ling curls his fingers around the metal immediately.

"Look, Shijie! He likes it!" Wei Wuxian exclaims, sounding much younger than his age.

"It's wonderful, A-Xian," Jiang Yanli breathes. Her smile is radiant. "Thank you."

Wei Wuxian's eyes glimmer with unshed tears. "I'm just glad I got to give it to him." He touches the bell lightly, smiling down at Jin Ling. "Care for it well, A-Ling."

Jin Ling gurgles and arranges his facial muscles into a smile, pushing down the grief threatening to overwhelm him. *The Yiling Laozu killed your parents; if he'd lived, he would have tried to kill you too.* That was what Jin Ling had been told ever since he could remember, and no one—not even Jiujiu—had denied it. How wrong they'd all been. How cruel, to deny Wei Wuxian's unmistakable love for him. How callous, to deny a lonely orphan the love of an uncle.

Before Jin Ling can get too deep into his thoughts, a high-pitched gurgle sounds from somewhere down below. Wei Wuxian looks down, laughing awkwardly.

"Sounds like this little radish is hungry," he says. "I...I should probably take him to town to get something to eat. Maybe we'll find an inn where we can clean ourselves up. I doubt anyone's prepared quarters for me."

Hanguang-jun clears his throat and turns around. "Wei Ying, you and A-Yuan can come to my quarters."

"...ah?" Wei Wuxian flushes bright red as Jiujiu, still facing the doors, lets out a muffled snort. Jiang Yanli turns her face away to hide her smile.

"Mn. It is a long walk to the nearest town. This will be faster and allow you time to rest and clean up before the start of the ceremony. Jingyi and A-Yuan will also not be separated."

Wei Wuxian lets out an awkward laugh. "Lan Zhan, are you certain? Won't your uncle have something to say about that?"

"I am certain." Hanguang-jun's expression is impassive, but he sounds like he's never been more certain of anything in his life. "Shufu is not attending. I will handle him when I return to the Cloud Recesses. Do not worry."

"Ah, well—" Wei Wuxian opens and closes his mouth several times like he's trying to come up with a rebuttal, but he finally ducks his head and says, "All right, Lan Zhan. It's a good plan."

"Mn. When you are ready, we can go."

"Ah—all right. Now is probably a good time." Wei Wuxian's eyes linger on Jin Ling, and he puts on a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Come on, A-Yuan, Jingyi."

"Wait, Xian-gege, Rich-gege," Lan Sizhui says in a rush, "can I see Jin Ling up close?"

"I want to see Jin Ling up close too," Lan Jingyi demands.

Jiang Yanli's eyes crinkle into a fond smile as Wei Wuxian flicks a glance up at her and Jin Zixuan. "It's all right. Go ahead and let them."

"All right, little radishes," Wei Wuxian says. He briefly disappears from view, then staggers back up with a grunt, holding Lan Sizhui above Jin Ling with both hands. Hanguang-jun does the same with Lan Jingyi with considerably less effort.

"Hello, Jin Ling," Lan Sizhui says. Despite the baby fat on his cheeks, he bears an eerie resemblance to Hanguang-jun as he intently studies Jin Ling's face, complete with furrowed brow and slightly downturned lips. "I'm S—I'm A-Yuan."

Jin Ling grunts and purposefully looks him in the eye, then does a slow, deliberate blink to try to convey his understanding.

"I'm Lan Jingyi," Lan Jingyi says, craning his neck to catch Jin Ling's gaze. "You're very small."

Jin Ling squints at Lan Jingyi, scrunching up his nose.

"Jingyi," Hanguang-jun reprimands, "Do not be rude."

"Jin Ling, do you like Xian-gege's gift?" Lan Sizhui asks.

Jin Ling makes a small noise of assent, clutching the bell closer to his chest.

Lan Sizhui chews on his lip. "Xian-gege, can we play with Jin Ling?"

"Play?" Wei Wuxian echoes in surprise. "I'm sorry, A-Yuan, he's too little to play. You'll have to wait until he's older."

Lan Sizhui's face falls. "But we'll see him again, right?"

"You'll see him tonight," Wei Wuxian says with forced cheer. "This whole party is celebrating his hundredth day, after all!"

"Can we give him a gift too?" Lan Sizhui asks.

"A drawing," Lan Jingyi adds.

"Did you make one and bring it all the way here without me knowing?" Wei Wuxian teases, pinching Lan Sizhui's cheek as he shifts him onto his hip.

"We'll make it now," Lan Sizhui says, not quite able to hide the urgency in his tone. "Rich-gege has paper and ink, right?"

"A-Yuan!" Wei Wuxian gasps in mock outrage. "How presumptuous! You think Rich-gege just has everything you need hidden in his pockets?"

"I have paper and ink in my quarters," Hanguang-jun answers. "A-Yuan and Jingyi may use as much as they want."

Wei Wuxian makes a small noise like he's been punched in the gut. "Lan Zhan! You're spoiling A-Yuan again!"

"And me," Lan Jingyi pouts, as Jin Zixuan mouths "Again?" with a slowly deepening crease in his brow.

"And Jingyi," Wei Wuxian agrees. "Yes, you're spoiling Jingyi too. I'm sure there's something on your Wall of Discipline about that."

"Mn. I will accept responsibility." Lan Wangji's mouth twitches like he's about to smile.

Wei Wuxian gasps. "Lan *Zhan*—"

Jiujiu whips around with a huff. "Wei Wuxian! If you don't hurry up, you'll still be standing here by the time the celebration starts. Go give those kids their baths. They can't show up to the party looking like this. You'd better neaten your own appearance, too. You've got dirt all over your robes and your hair's falling out like usual."

Wei Wuxian scowls. "Jiang Cheng!"

"What? I'm right. And you *still* haven't explained how or why these children are here. I'm waiting!"

Wei Wuxian turns to Hanguang-jun with a bright smile. "Lan Zhan, Jiang-zongzhu makes such a good point! We really should get going."

"Wei Wuxian—!" Jiujiu snaps his mouth shut when Jiang Yanli shoots him a stern look. "Fine," he snaps through gritted teeth, "I will see you at the start of the celebration."

"I'll have some clothes sent over for A-Yuan so he can look like a proper young master," Jiang Yanli says, smiling warmly at Lan Sizhui.

"Thank you, Nice-jiejie," Lan Sizhui says with a sweet smile.

Jiang Yanli makes a soft cooing noise, her face melting with fondness. "You're welcome, A-Yuan-gongzi. Hanguang-jun, should I also send a set for Jingyi?"

"No, thank you. We will manage." Hanguang-jun hoists Jin Ling onto his hip, nodding at Jin Zixuan, Jiang Yanli, and Jiujiu. "We will take our leave now."

"I'll see you soon," Wei Wuxian says to Jiang Yanli like it's a promise. His glance flickers down to Jin Ling. "Be good for your mother, A-Ling. Jin-shao-zongzhu." He nods at Jin Zixuan, then smirks at Jiujiu, waggling his eyebrows. "Jiang-zongzhu."

Jiujiu glares at him. "Wei Wuxian. Stay out of trouble tonight."

"I will, I will, I promise." Wei Wuxian's smirk softens into a genuine smile. "It's good to see you, Jiang Cheng." He turns without waiting for Jiujiu's reaction and returns to Hanguang-jun's side, missing the pleased look that flashes rapid-fire across Jiujiu's face. "Lan Zhan. Let's go."

"Mn."

Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun turn as one, taking Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui out of sight as they walk briskly toward the doors. Their retreating backs—white and black—are a familiar, almost comforting sight. Jiujiu says his goodbyes shortly afterward, telling Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan that he's going to check on the Jiang disciples, and then Jin Ling is being bundled up and carried away toward his parents' private quarters so that he can be dressed in his ceremonial outfit. Jin Ling lets himself drift as a bevy of servants bustles around him, relief washing over him in a wave. Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi are here now too. Between the three of them, they can find a way to resolve this together, no matter how impossible it seems.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

It is time. 🐱

Jin Zixun and Su She:



Wei Wuxian:



This meme was originally posted on my [twitter](#) and [tumblr](#) as I was plotting out this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"All right," Wei Wuxian says, gently tugging the brush out of Lan Sizhui's hands. "A-Yuan, Jingyi, it's time for your baths."

"Wait, I'm almost done!" Lan Jingyi exclaims, making a frustrated noise as a drop of ink falls onto the page. It blots his crude drawing of Jin Zixun, who looks like an angry, misshapen blob with a bunch of dark spots all over his body. It's one of many pieces he and Lan Sizhui have created for Jin Ling's gift, trying to narrate what they've accomplished since they arrived in this world. Lan Sizhui still isn't really certain that Jin Ling also traveled back with them, but Lan Jingyi seems fully convinced for some reason, and that's a good enough basis to go on.

"All right, now I'm done!" Lan Jingyi flicks his wrist in Lan Sizhui's direction, splattering them both with ink. Lan Sizhui grimaces, and so does Wei Wuxian.

"Aiyah," Wei Wuxian sighs, sending a pleading look to Hanguang-jun as he steps out from behind the privacy screen. "Lan Zhan! Will you get the baths started for the boys? I'll clean up here."

Hanguang-jun nods. His eyes zero in on a small ink spot on Wei Wuxian's cheek, and his hand twitches at his side, rising in the air like he's about to wipe the spot off with his fingers. Lan Jingyi catches Lan Sizhui's eye and raises his eyebrows.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian says with a nervous laugh. "Is something wrong?"

Hanguang-jun inhales sharply and turns away, his ears turning red. "Nothing is wrong. I'll help the boys. Jingyi, A-Yuan, come."

Lan Sizhui follows Hanguang-jun behind the screen, studiously averting his gaze as Hanguang-jun places him in the water across from Jingyi.

"Jingyi, may I undo your forehead ribbon?" Hanguang-jun asks. "I know I am neither your mother nor father, but it will be easier to clean your hair without it."

Lan Jingyi swallows and looks down hesitantly. "Um...yes. Yes! That's fine. It's an emergency."

Hanguang-jun hums, nimbly unknitting the ribbon from Lan Jingyi's hair. "I will be careful with it."

Lan Sizhui reaches up and touches his own bare forehead, his gut twisting with an echo of old pain. *I'm not a Lan yet*, he thinks. He still remembers the whispers that surrounded him during his first few days at the Cloud Recesses, before the Elders had finally acquiesced to adding him to the family register as Hanguang-jun's adopted son. The rumors had finally stopped after he'd received his forehead ribbon and disciple robes.

An unpleasant thought strikes him like a blunt sword to the chest. Will he even become a Lan disciple in this changed future? There's no reason for Hanguang-jun to take him in, even as an outer disciple. If he remains with his family—if he stays a Wen—it's likely he won't receive any formal cultivation training. Wei Wuxian will probably teach him talismans and sword forms, and Wen Qing will probably try to pass on all that she knows, but—

"A-Yuan?" Hanguang-jun says, voice soft. "What's wrong?"

Lan Sizhui's eyes sting with tears at the familiar concern in Hanguang-jun's voice. How many times had he run to the Jingshi in his early years at the Cloud Recesses, seeking comfort from Hanguang-jun—and receiving it even when Hanguang-jun still lay bedridden? Is that also something he'll have to give up?

It's better this way, he tells himself. *This way, my family survives, and so does Wei Wuxian—and Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan. Hanguang-jun won't be whipped and scarred for life, Chifeng-zun won't be manipulated into a qi deviation, and Zewu-jun—*

A chubby foot nudges his ankle under the water. "A-Yuan!" Lan Jingyi says loudly. "It's all right!"

"Jingyi," Hanguang-jun admonishes.

Lan Sizhui scrubs at his eyes with wet hands. "Sorry," he mumbles, sniffing as Wei Wuxian ducks around the screen with an alarmed look.

"Do you want a forehead ribbon too?" Lan Jingyi asks with a keen glance at Lan Sizhui's face. Lan Sizhui doesn't know whether to be relieved or alarmed at how quickly his best friend caught on. Lan Jingyi adds, "You should have one too! We'll give you one."

Wei Wuxian makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat. "I don't think that's how that works, Jingyi. Lan Zhan, you explain."

Hanguang-jun, however, is wearing a thoughtful frown. "It is not out of the realm of possibility. If his family agreed..." His voice trails off, and the crease in his brow deepens. "I would be willing to make the case for it."

Wei Wuxian sucks in a strangled breath. "Lan Zhan..."

"Mn. We can discuss it when I escort you back to the Burial Mounds after the celebration."

"...escort?" Wei Wuxian echoes with a suspicious frown. "Lan Zhan! Don't you trust me? I don't need an escort. I won't be doing any wicked tricks just trying to get back home."

"Wei Ying," Hanguang-jun says, distress bleeding into his tone. "That—that was not what I meant. I merely want to ensure A-Yuan's safety—and yours."

"I—oh." Wei Wuxian blows out a breath. "Your uncle won't like that."

Hanguang-jun fixes Wei Wuxian with an intense stare over the top of Lan Jingyi's head. "I will handle Shufu, as I said before. Your safety—both of yours—is more important."

"Oh," Wei Wuxian says in a soft voice, his cheeks flushing. "Lan Zhan, you're too good."

"Hm." Hanguang-jun finishes rinsing Lan Jingyi's hair and moves to the other side of the tub to start on Lan Sizhui's. "Wei Ying, please help Jingyi dressed. I bought spare robes once I received your letter, and I laid them out on the other side of the screen. I will style his hair afterward."

"All right," Wei Wuxian says, still in that same soft voice. "A-Yuan, be good for your Rich-gege."

Lan Jingyi puts up a token protest at wanting to stay with Lan Sizhui, but he lets Wei Wuxian lift him up out of the tub and towel him dry. Hanguang-jun directs Lan Sizhui to close his eyes, and he obeys, relaxing into the gentle fall of warm water across his back and the soft, damp cloth rubbing against his skin. He's half-asleep by the time Wei Wuxian has wrangled him into a clean set of robes. They're aggressively plain in both color and pattern—Lan

Sizhui won't be mistaken as a lost child from any major or minor sect—but they're soft and don't have any holes, so Lan Sizhui counts it as a win.

Hanguang-jun styles Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi's hair in the same way, helps Lan Jingyi retie his forehead ribbon, and then turns to Wei Wuxian, looking him up and down.

Wei Wuxian shifts with a nervous laugh. "Do I look acceptable, Lan Zhan?" His face is freshly washed, still shining a little with water, and he's redone his hair in its usual high ponytail, red ribbon trailing brightly down his back. He's even managed to get most of the road dust off his black robes. Chenqing is hanging on his belt, polished and gleaming; Lan Sizhui spots the remains of a flute cleaning kit on the table. His cleaned-up appearance almost covers up the gauntness clinging to his bones.

Hanguang-jun's eyes linger on a drop of water beaded on Wei Wuxian's neck. "You look more than acceptable. You look good." His ears flush a deep red, and he turns swiftly, taking Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui's hands and leading them out of the room.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian sputters, running after them as he tucks a wooden tube under his arm.

It's such a familiar scene that Lan Sizhui can't help it; he laughs, unbridled and joyful for the first time since he woke up in this world. Lan Jingyi catches his eye, grinning, as Wei Wuxian joins them with a huff.

Their good cheer lasts until they reach the Glamour Hall, where Jin Guangyao and Zewu-jun are waiting for them with fixed smiles. Zewu-jun's softens into something more genuine as he spots Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi, who both straighten up as if they're reporting back from a night hunt. Jin Guangyao glances down at the two of them with empty eyes, and Lan Sizhui shivers as a chill crawls down his spine.

This man killed my family, he thinks as the adults bow to each other. He killed everyone who loved me, except for Hanguang-jun.

"Wei-gongzi, Hanguang-jun," Jin Guangyao greets. "We are so happy you have joined us. Who are these little ones?"

"This is Lan Jingyi," Hanguang-jun says, and Lan Jingyi sketches a stiff bow. "And this is A-Yuan."

"A-Yuan?" Jin Guangyao asks, his voice lilting upward the slightest bit to indicate a slight seed of doubt. "Does he have a surname? Who are his parents?"

Lan Sizhui steps forward, driven by the reckless impulse that sometimes seizes him when he's feeling especially angry. "My mother and father are dead," he says, tilting his head up so he can meet Jin Guangyao's gaze. "And jiejie, too. They were killed in the war." He snaps his mouth shut before he can reveal too much, retreating to Hanguang-jun's side.

"Ah," Jin Guangyao says, arranging his face into an expression of pity. "I'm sorry to hear that, little one." He looks between Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun, searching for something that

he does not appear to find, and then puts on a polite smile. "The Glamour Hall is no place for small children. Let me call some of the servants to bring these two to the nursery with the other toddlers."

"That is not necessary," Hanguang-jun says, his hand tightening around Lan Sizhui's. "These children will be staying with me and Wei Ying."

Jin Guangyao's smile drops the slightest bit. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Hanguang-jun. I can arrange for the boys to stay with you in the hall, but Wei-gongzi is not seated near the Lan sect."

"Then I will sit with Wei Ying during the festivities," Hanguang-jun answers.

"Wangji," Zewu-jun warns.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian says quietly, "It's all right. Go and be with your sect. I trust you'll take good care of the boys."

A stubborn set appears in Hanguang-jun's jaw. "Wei Ying."

"Lan Zhan, it's really all right. I'll come and find you at the end of the night."

Lan Jingyi sends Lan Sizhui a wide-eyed, panicked look, gesturing for him to do something.

Lan Sizhui tears his hand out of Hanguang-jun's grip and latches onto Wei Wuxian's leg. "I want to stay with Xian-gege," he declares, looking up at Wei Wuxian with a pleading pout.

"Aiyah," Wei Wuxian says, patting Lan Sizhui's head with a pained smile. "A-Yuan, I'm not going anywhere! We're all going to be in the same room. You just have to sit with Hanguang-jun and Jingyi for the night."

"No," Lan Sizhui says, lifting his chin stubbornly. It's a move he learned from Hanguang-jun. He screws up his face like he's about to cry and raises his voice. "I'm staying with Xian-gege! Don't go!"

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian says, frowning, "please, don't do this now. Be a good boy."

"No!" Lan Sizhui wails, drawing several stares from passersby. "No! No! No! No! NO!"

Lan Jingyi darts around Hanguang-jun and plants himself at Lan Sizhui's side. "I won't go anywhere without A-Yuan or Xian-gege *or* Hanguang-jun!" he shouts, stomping his foot. Zewu-jun winces at the volume of his voice, and Jin Guangyao gives everyone around them an apologetic look.

"You see the problem, xiongzhang," Hanguang-jun says to Zewu-jun dryly, his mouth twitching with faint amusement. "The children will not be separated from each other or from Wei Ying."

Zewu-jun lets out a deep sigh, looking very much like Lan Qiren for a moment. "Wangji, you know this will not go unnoticed."

"I am willing to bear the consequences," Hanguang-jun says, a hint of coolness in his tone. He turns to Jin Guangyao. "Lianfang-zun, thank you for your patience. It appears this matter is settled. Jingyi, A-Yuan, and I will sit with Wei Ying. Please show us into the hall."

Jin Guangyao shoots a helpless look at Zewu-jun, who sighs again, then nods. "Very well. Wangji, please make sure you visit our sect disciples at some point this evening. A-Yao, please, lead the way."

Lan Sizhui exchanges a relieved glance with Lan Jingyi. That's one problem solved.

The hall breaks out into whispers as soon as Wei Wuxian is spotted. Hanguang-jun's expression grows as cold as ice, and he sticks close to Wei Wuxian's side as Jin Guangyao shows them to a table at the end of the hall. A gaudy gilt screen with a peony pattern conspicuously encircles the table, blocking other guests' view of Wei Wuxian unless they're standing right in front of him. Even worse, it prevents Wei Wuxian from seeing Jin Ling, Jiang Yanli, Jiang-zongzhu, and anyone else who might be present in the room.

"Lianfang-zun," Hanguang-jun says, gesturing to the screen, "what is the meaning of this?"

Jin Guangyao makes a small, contrite noise and dips his head. "Hanguang-jun, I understand this may be viewed as an extreme measure, but this arrangement was felt to be safest for all parties attending the banquet tonight."

"Safest," Hanguang-jun echoes in a low voice that drips with disapproval.

Jin Guangyao winces. "Ah, yes—we were not expecting you to join Wei-gongzi, nor for there to be two children present."

"This is unacceptable," Hanguang-jun declares, directing a frosty glare at Jin Guangyao. His voice is soft but carries across the hall, which falls silent as everyone's attention turns toward them.

Wei Wuxian grimaces. "Lan Zhan, it's all right. It's enough that I'm here, isn't it?"

"You are a guest, and you deserve the same courtesy given to any other here. When I wrote your invitation, I did not anticipate that it would be used to humiliate you in this manner. This is an insult to both of us, and one that I hope will be swiftly addressed and corrected."

"Wangji," Zewu-jun protests with a strained smile. "I'm sure that if we give A-Yao a little bit of time, he will find a way to readjust the seating and resolve this situation."

Jin Guangyao peeks up at Zewu-jun from underneath his lashes. It's terribly effective. "Er-ge always speaks with wisdom. Hanguang-jun, Wei-gongzi, I beg your patience a little while longer. I will make sure that you are both properly accommodated before the banquet starts." He bows low, then bustles off with a swish of robes, leaving the hall in a suffocating silence. Zewu-jun hesitates for a moment, then follows.

A tall, muscular man dressed in Nie colors clears his throat and makes his way over, Nie Huaisang drifting behind him with a keen, interested glance that he half-hides behind his fan.

"Wangji. Wei Wuxian."

"Chifeng-zun," Hanguang-jun greets, and Wei Wuxian does the same. Lan Sizhui's eyes widen. He has no recollection of ever meeting the legendary Chifeng-zun, but looking up at the imposing figure, Lan Sizhui feels more like the toddler whose body he inhabits than he ever has since being transported to the past. Lan Jingyi apparently feels the same, judging by his awestruck expression.

"Somehow I thought the Sunshot Campaign would put an end to pointless conflict," Nie Mingjue says. "But even a hundredth day celebration is not as peaceful as it ought to be." He looks pointedly at Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian swallows and looks down at the ground, uncharacteristically silent. Hanguang-jun, sensing his discomfort, steps in front of him protectively.

Nie Huaisang steps up next to his brother, a distressed expression on his face. He looks every inch the flighty Headshaker that Lan Sizhui was familiar with until recently. "Wei-xiong—excuse me, Wei-gongzi, Hanguang-jun, I don't think Da-ge meant any offense! Right, Da-ge?"

Nie Mingjue crosses his arms over his chest and nods. "I only mean to say, not everyone values peace as they should, or understands what we sacrificed to buy it."

Wei Wuxian looks up, a small smile appearing on his face. "Chifeng-zun always speaks his mind so clearly."

Nie Mingjue snorts. "You know I don't have any regard for all this pomp and circumstance. The Jin can have their petty little power plays, but the Nie are more pragmatic. We haven't forgotten who helped end the war." He sighs and shrugs. "I don't agree with you harboring the Wen, but none of you have caused any trouble for a year now. As long as it remains that way, then there's no reason for us to be hostile."

Wei Wuxian bows deeply. "Thank you, Chifeng-zun. You have my sincere gratitude."

Nie Mingjue nods and turns, striding back to his table.

"It's good to see you both," Nie Huaisang says, glancing between Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian once before he hurries to follow his brother down the aisle.

A small, delicate cough sounds behind them. "Hanguang-jun, Wei-gongzi, we have rearranged the seating as requested. I hope you will find this more fitting." Jin Guangyao bows in their direction, not quite meeting their eyes, and scuttles away before Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian have finished turning.

Lan Sizhui tamps down a spark of rage as he studies the empty tables that have been placed behind, adjacent to, and opposite Wei Wuxian's original position, visibly isolating him from the other guests in lieu of the circular screen. "Well," Wei Wuxian says with a tight smile, "It's an improvement. At least I can see the people around me. And they can see me, too!"

Hanguang-jun's face resembles a stormcloud, dark and shadowed with rising anger. He clenches his hand around Bichen like he's about to find Jin Guangyao and run him right through. "Wei Ying—"

"Aiyah, Lan Zhan—" Wei Wuxian grabs Hanguang-jun's wrist, tugging it free from Bichen's hilt. "It's fine. The boys will each get their own table, and so will we. It'll be nice to have plenty of space, won't it? I was worried that all four of us would have to cram together at that tiny little space inside the screen. Come on, let's sit down. The ceremony is bound to start at any moment now."

Hanguang-jun's nostrils flare as he takes in a long breath. "Very well. I will take the table to your left, closer to the other guests." He kneels without further fanfare, setting Bichen within easy reach and straightening his back. The guests and servants who were staring at them quickly turn their faces away in response when they catch sight of him, but their hushed speculations and titters continue nevertheless.

Wei Wuxian herds Lan Sizhui to the table behind him and Lan Jingyi to the one behind Hanguang-jun, and they kneel down together with proper posture—well, or what could pass as proper for a toddler. "Such good boys," Wei Wuxian says, bending down to adjust their skirts. "Stay at these tables for the night, and don't go anywhere without me or Hanguang-jun. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Xian-gege," Lan Sizhui says, nodding emphatically. "We'll stay right here."

"Yes, Wei-qianbei!" Lan Jingyi answers.

"There you go with Wei-qianbei again!" Wei Wuxian laughs, a rueful smile tugging at his lips. "All right, be good, both of you. If you need anything, just come and tug on my robes." He pats their heads gently, then turns and kneels at his own table, back moving up and down as he lets out a long sigh. With his and Hanguang-jun's backs blocking the view of the aisle, and the adjacent tables forming a barrier between them and the Pingyang Yao disciples two rows over, Lan Sizhui almost feels like he and Lan Jingyi are in their own, safe little bubble. Lan Sizhui wonders if Jin Guangyao had anticipated that when he was rearranging their corner, or whether he'd simply been focused on humiliating Wei Wuxian to a lesser degree.

The hall falls quiet when Jin Guangshan and Jin-furen sweep in, signaling the start of the formal presentation of gifts. Jiang Yanli, Jin Zixuan, and Jin Ling follow a moment later, taking the places of honor on a raised dais at the front of the hall. The Glamour Hall's acoustics and the distant position from the front make it hard to discern exactly what's going on, and Lan Sizhui lets the drone of voices blend together as he traces the patterns of the gilt-edged table. Next to him, Lan Jingyi seems to be dozing off while sitting up, a skill Lan Sizhui has seen him perfect over many years during meditation practice at the Cloud Recesses.

Lan Sizhui briefly considers waking him up. They still haven't worked out how to get their drawings to Jin Ling—but there's no way they'll be able to present them as a gift in the formal ceremony, not without casting even more suspicion on Wei Wuxian. Their presence is already enough of an anomaly; there's no reason to give people even more ammunition for gossip. There's bound to be an opportunity later, or so he hopes.

The atmosphere in the hall turns convivial once the ceremony ends, carefully polite remarks replaced by boisterous chatter as servants bring out food, wine, and tea. Hanguang-jun receives a hot meal and a steaming pot of tea at the same time as everyone else, but Wei Wuxian's table remains noticeably empty of both food and drink, as do A-Yuan's and Jingyi's.

It takes an incense stick's worth of time for something to finally arrive. A harried servant drops a cold, burnt bowl of rice with some rough vegetables and some chicken that looks more bones than meat on Wei Wuxian's table, along with a cracked teacup and a misshapen pot of tea. Wei Wuxian's shoulders slump at the obvious slight, and he lets out a resigned sigh as he picks up his chopsticks.

"Wei Ying, stop." Hanguang-jun—who has been picking carefully at his own meal—reaches out and grabs Wei Wuxian's wrist before he can even pick up a single grain of rice. "Don't touch that."

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian snaps, "what are you doing?"

"Wei Ying, someone in this hall has already conspired to kill you once. I will not allow them to succeed in their second attempt."

Wei Wuxian slowly lowers his chopsticks. "Oh."

"Mn. I've tested all my food and determined that it is not poisoned. I've portioned it out for you, A-Yuan, and Jingyi to share." Hanguang-jun turns and sets two hot bowls of rice, vegetables, and braised pork in front of Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi, then shifts on his knees and reaches across Wei Wuxian's table, moving the unappetizing meal and the broken teaset to the floor. He then transfers all the food he's been served—soup, a meat dish, a vegetable dish, and plate of small, sweet cakes—to Wei Wuxian's table, leaving only his tea for himself.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian protests, "I can't take all this from you! What will you eat?"

"I am full," Hanguang-jun says, pouring a steaming cup of tea and setting it on Wei Wuxian's table. "Eat. The food should still be warm."

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian says helplessly, pointing his chopsticks at Hanguang-jun. "I'll repay you for this someday. Just you wait!"

"There is no need," Hanguang-jun says, and he turns back around to look at Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi. "Go ahead and eat now. It should be safe."

"Thank you, Hanguang-jun," Lan Sizhui says, then wants to smack himself as surprise flashes across Hanguang-jun's face. "Uh—I mean—Rich-gege is very nice!"

"He *is* Hanguang-jun," Lan Jingyi adds in a weak attempt to help.

Hanguang-jun's eyes soften. "A-Yuan, if you become a Lan disciple, I will teach you the proper forms of address. For now, you may call me whatever you like."

Lan Sizhui's face heats with a mixture of embarrassment and gratitude. "Thank you, Rich-gege," he mumbles. He fumbles with his chopsticks, focusing on picking up a slippery piece

of pork, and finally manages to bring it to his mouth. It's warm, just as Hanguang-jun promised, and rich and flavorful too. Lan Jingyi grins, patting his stomach with a contented look while Hanguang-jun watches Wei Wuxian finish his meal with a satisfied glint in his eyes.

Unfortunately, their peaceful bubble doesn't last long. As the night wears on and alcohol flows, speculative looks turned in their direction transform into degrading remarks about A-Yuan's origins (the prevailing theory is that he's Wei Wuxian's bastard child by Wen Qing), Wei Wuxian's disloyalty and ungratefulness toward the Jiang clan, Hanguang-jun's misguided pity in demanding respect for Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian's numerous evil deeds as the Yiling Laozu, including stealing virgins, kidnapping children, and performing sacrificial rituals.

Wei Wuxian, for his part, keeps his head down and pointedly ignores it all, though he does flinch occasionally whenever something strikes a nerve. Meanwhile, Hanguang-jun grows as cold and still as the jade statue everyone is always proclaiming him to be, glaring at everyone who dares to get too close to their corner.

There is only one person arrogant enough to ignore the warning that Hanguang-jun is broadcasting, and that is Jin Zixun.

"Wei Wuxian!" he bellows drunkenly, drawing every single eye in the hall toward him. "I've waited long enough!"

Before Wei Wuxian can even lift a finger, Hanguang-jun swiftly steps in front of him, unsheathing Bichen and holding it at arm's length to stop Jin Zixun from approaching.

"Hanguang-jun," Jin Zixun spits, "get out of my way!"

"Step back," Hanguang-jun says, voice icy.

"Lan Zhan—" Wei Wuxian starts to rise, but Lan Sizhui tugs hard on his skirts, making him stumble back down. Lan Jingyi darts over from his own table to help.

Jin Zixun sneers, trying to stand up on his tiptoes and peek over Hanguang-jun's broad shoulders. "I don't know how you convinced Hanguang-jun to fight your battles for you, Wei Wuxian, and I don't really care. I demand you remove this curse at once!"

"I didn't curse anyone!" Wei Wuxian yells, slamming his hands onto the table in frustration. The dishes rattle, almost falling to the floor. He tries to stand up again, but Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui sit on his robes, putting him at risk of ripping his entire outfit. "A-Yuan, Jingyi, get off me—"

"It's dangerous, Xian-gege!" Lan Sizhui argues.

"Aiyah, I'm the senior here!" Wei Wuxian tugs at his robes ineffectually. "Boys, now is not the time!"

"Um," Nie Huaisang says, drifting over with a wave of his fan, "*what* curse are we talking about here?"

"What does it matter!" Ouyang-zongzhu appears by Yao-zongzhu's side, sloshing wine into the air as he gestures wildly. "Anything the Yiling Laozu does should be condemned!"

"Anything?" Nie Huaisang asks doubtfully. "I don't know—Wei Wuxian *did* defeat Wen Ruohan—"

"Lianfang-zun was the one who killed Wen Ruohan!" Su She shouts from across the hall. Rage courses hot and sharp through Lan Sizhui at the sound of the man's voice, and he has to run himself through a breathing exercise to hear past the blood rushing in his ears.

"That's right!" Yao-zongzhu blusters. "We could have won without Wei Wuxian's wicked tricks!"

"Nonsense!" Nie Mingjue thunders. "If Wei Wuxian hadn't turned the tide, none of us would be alive right now! Even worse, we might be undead puppets killing our own kin on behalf of Wen Ruohan!"

Uneasy murmurs sound throughout the crowd. No one dares to argue with the general of the Sunshot Campaign about anything that happened during the war.

"How is Wei Wuxian any different from Wen Ruohan?" Su She asks. "Didn't he use an artifact to control the dead? Didn't he create the Ghost General out of rage and resentment? Didn't he steal the Wen prisoners from the Jin so he could build his own army? How are we so sure he won't become the next mad dictator, using his twisted cultivation to turn *us* all into the undead?!"

"Lies and slander," Hanguang-jun says, his voice cold.

"Lies and slander, Hanguang-jun?" Su She asks in a mocking tone, rising from his seat. "You were on the battlefield yourself—and at the night hunt, and at the prison camp at Qionggqi Path! Has the company of the Yiling Laozu turned even you against your allies?"

"You are not my ally. You are not even qualified to speak to me." The sideways look Hanguang-jun directs at Su She could cut steel. "Traitor."

The crowd gasps. Lan Sizhui thinks he hears someone making a sound of approval, but he can't tell who it's coming from.

"Hanguang-jun," Su She says, trembling with rage, "with all due respect, I am a sect leader, and you are nothing but the spare heir of the Lan clan. You are the one who is not qualified to speak to me."

Hanguang-jun's hand clenches tight around Bichen. The Lan disciples who were at Qionggqi Path edge closer to Su She, their own hands wrapped around the hilts of their swords.

"Su-zongzhu, Hanguang-jun, please," Jin Guangyao says with an nervous laugh. He's standing next to Jin Zixuan at the dais, a tiny gold and black speck that reminds Lan Sizhui of

a bee. "These past conflicts were smoothed over long ago."

"Nothing is smoothed over until the Lan sect recognizes Moling Su as its equal!" Su She declares. He fails to suppress a surprised cringe as the Lan disciples guarding him break into fits of muffled laughter.

Hanguang-jun doesn't deign to provide any response. He doesn't even look in Su She's direction. Su She's face—already flushed with drink—turns red with rage at the obvious slight, opening his mouth to spew even more vitriol, but Jin Zixun cuts him off.

"Whatever the case," he spits, because he doesn't have two braincells to rub together, "Wei Wuxian cursed me and I want him to undo it!"

"You still haven't said *which* curse," Nie Huaisang points out.

"This one!" Jin Zixun points to the giant white peony on his outer robe.

Nie Huaisang peers at it, brow wrinkling in confusion. "That's Sparks-Amidst-Snow, the Jin sect symbol. Are you saying Wei Wuxian cursed you to be a Jin? How unfilial of you!"

Giggles echo around the hall. Even Wei Wuxian's mouth curves into a smile.

"You little—" Jin Zixun throws his wine jug to the ground. Nie Huaisang jumps back with a high-pitched scream as the porcelain shatters at his feet.

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue bellows, swooping over to his brother's side. He brandishes Baxia at Jin Zixun's chest. "Jin Zixun! You dare!"

"Fine," Jin Zixun yells, looking around. His face is practically purple with rage as he draws his sword and points it at his chest. "Fine! You all don't believe me. I'll show you exactly what I mean!"

"Zixun, don't!" Jin Zixuan calls in alarm from the raised dais, just as Jin Guangyao starts running down the aisle.

"Da-ge, Hanguang-jun, Zixun, please! We can discuss this—"

His breathless entreaties come far too late. By the time he reaches the group, Jin Zixun has cut a line clean through his robes and shrugged off all his layers, exposing his naked, hole-ridden torso in all its glory. Nie Huaisang makes a soft retching sound, which is echoed by several disciples around him from various sects, while Ouyang-zongzhu actually faints into one of his disciple's arms.

"That," Yao-zongzhu croaks, pointing at Jin Zixun's chest with a shaking finger. "That—that—Wei Wuxian has indeed cursed Jin Zixun!" The room dissolves into cacophony, and he raises his voice above the fray. "It must be revenge for what happened at the Phoenix Mountain Night Hunt!"

"Ridiculous!" Hanguang-jun hisses.

"It wasn't me," Wei Wuxian protests, dropping his head in his hands. "Who cares about the stupid night hunt!"

"It wasn't him! It was Su She!" Lan Jingyi screams. He knocks the dishes off of Lan Sizhui's table and climbs on top of it. "Wei Wuxian rescued me and A-Yuan when Su She kidnapped us!"

Lan Sizhui's head whips around at the use of their fake cover story. "Jingyi!" he hisses with wide eyes, scrambling onto the table with him. "Jingyi, don't—"

Lan Jingyi ignores him. "It was Su She!" he screams again, his voice swallowed by the general wave of accusations that are flying toward Wei Wuxian. "Su She did it! Su She kidnapped us! Su She cursed Jin Zixun! SU SHE!"

"Everyone, please, calm down—" Jin Guangyao tries, reaching out with a placating gesture that no one acknowledges. "Please—"

"Wangji, Mingjue, please," Zewu-jun says, appearing next to Nie Mingjue and grasping the man's shoulder. He raises his head and locks eyes with Hanguang-jun. "There is no need for this—"

"Please—" Jin Guangyao is starting to look desperate. "This can be resolved peacefully—"

An ear-piercing scream cuts through the noise, and several people wince, clapping their hands over their ears as they bow low to someone walking down the aisle. Two someones. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli approach the gathered group with slow, measured steps, the latter cradling a bawling Jin Ling to her chest. Jiang-zongzhu walks behind them, hand resting on Sandu's hilt and Zidian sparking on his finger like he's ready to fight at any moment. Jin Guangshan and Jin-furen are nowhere in sight.

"Well done, everyone," Jin Zixuan says dryly, "you've upset my son on his own hundredth day celebration."

Jin Ling wriggles in Jiang Yanli's arms, shaking the Clarity Bell Wei Wuxian had given him earlier like he's trying to make a point. "Ah," he wails, "Ahhhhh!"

"Are you proud of yourselves? Is this what you hoped to achieve when you came here?" Jiang Yanli asks, looking every inch the daughter of the late Yu-furen. She catches Jin Zixun's eye and glares at him until he averts his gaze, while Nie Mingjue and Hanguang-jun slowly sheathe their blades. Wei Wuxian quietly rises from his own table, freed at last. "Did you all decide that the true purpose of this gathering was to attack Wei Wuxian?"

The silence that falls is laden with shame. Many of the guests look down, shuffling their feet.

"Jin-shao-zongzhu, Jin-shao-furen," Jin Guangyao says, bowing low, "please, allow me to make up for this catastrophe. I will take responsibility for this incident and its resolution. You should both go and get some rest with your son. There is no need to bring more stress to him or to yourselves."

"Thank you, A-Yao," Jin Zixuan says with obvious relief. "A-Li?"

Jiang Yanli nods. "That is acceptable. But there is one more thing we need to do."

Jin Zixuan blinks, confused, but he doesn't protest. "All right."

"Yes." Jiang Yanli turns to Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-jun with a warm smile. "Hanguang-jun, A-Xian. I believe the children who accompanied you here promised Jin Ling some drawings?"

"Mn," Hanguang-jun says, gesturing for Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi to come forward. Wei Wuxian pulls a wooden tube out of his sleeve and helps position it so that it rests in their hands, then guides them forward until they're in front of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan. "Go ahead and bow," he murmurs, and they do as Wei Wuxian also bows alongside Hanguang-jun.

Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian exchange a glance, and then Hanguang-jun says, "Jin-shao-zongzhu, Jin-shao-furen, please accept these handmade drawings as a gift to Jin Rulan from these two young boys, who hope that Jin Rulan may be entertained and educated by what is depicted."

"Thank you," Jin Zixuan says, accepting the tube from the boys with much more gravity than the situation warrants. "This gift is appreciated."

"We will take our leave now," Jiang Yanli says. She gives Wei Wuxian a small, reassuring smile that belies the worry in her eyes, then turns and walks out of the hall with Jin Zixuan at his side. Wei Wuxian swallows hard, watching them go. Jiang-zongzhu doesn't accompany them, but remains standing next to Nie Mingjue, looking at Wei Wuxian with a deep furrow in his brow.

"All right," Jin Guangyao says with a delicate cough, "if everyone could please retake their seats? I'm sure we can resolve this in a civilized manner."

No one moves.

"San-ge," Nie Huaisang says, cringing a little behind his fan when everyone turns their attention to him. "I—I think there's a very easy solution to this problem."

"What is it, Huaisang?" Jin Guangyao asks with a strained smile.

"Well..." Nie Huaisang flutters his fan, drawing out the word. "I—I don't know a lot, but that looks like the Hundred Holes Curse to me. Um, is that right, Er-ge?" He glances up at Zewu-jun.

"That's correct, Huaisang," Zewu-jun says with a carefully neutral expression.

Nie Huaisang frowns like he's thinking hard, tapping his chin with his fan. "Um, well, doesn't the caster of the Hundred Holes Curse also suffer the same effects as the recipient?"

"Yes," Zewu-jun says.

"Well, then it's quite easy! Only two people here have been accused of casting the curse. Wei-gongzi here—" he points at Wei Wuxian with his fan—"and Su-zongzhu. All they need to do is show us that they don't have the same horrible sores on their body!"

"Huaisang," Jin Guangyao says, wincing, "what exactly are you proposing?"

"If Wei-gongzi and Su-zongzhu could remove their robes like Jin Zixun has—"

"Huaisang," Nie Mingjue growls.

Nie Huaisang backtracks at once. "I'm merely saying—ah—" He ducks his face behind his fan, darting a quick glance at Jin Zixun, who's still standing there half-naked with his robes trailing the ground. The expression on his face is pure embarrassment. Nie Huaisang clears his throat and says, "W-well, Jin-gongzi also has sores on his arms, doesn't he? We could just ask Wei-gongzi and Su-zongzhu to roll up their sleeves! That won't be too much of an indignity, will it?"

Jin Guangyao hesitates, something calculating in his eyes. Lan Sizhui's heart jumps to his throat as Jin Guangyao opens his mouth, no doubt about to make some slippery excuse, but then Wei Wuxian steps forward, unlacing his bracer with one hand.

"I have nothing to hide," Wei Wuxian declares, throwing his bracer on the ground. "Is everyone watching? Good." He lifts his arm and rolls up the sleeves of his robes as far as they'll go, exposing the entirety of his forearm and half of his bicep. There's nothing to see but wiry muscle and tanned skin, not a single, weeping sore in sight.

The silence in the hall is deafening.

"Su-zongzhu," Zewu-jun says quietly, "please lift up your sleeve."

Su She lifts his chin, trembling. A bead of sweat drips down from his temple. "No."

Hanguang-jun jerks his head at the Lan disciples, and they surround Su She in a semicircle, grabbing both his arms. The two Moling Su disciples who accompanied Su She to the conference stand frozen, watching with wide eyes.

"How dare you!" Su She shrieks. "Unhand me! Unhand me at once!"

The Lan disciples ignore him, dragging him to the center of the circle next to Jin Zixun.

"Lianfang-zun!" Su She wails. "Lianfang-zun! Help me!"

Jin Guangyao's face shutters. "Su-zongzhu, please excuse this inconvenience. I assure you this will be resolved quickly. You merely need to show us that you bear no marks on your arm."

"But—" The shock on Su She's face is almost comical. "Lianfang-zun!"

"Please proceed," Jin Guangyao tells the Lan disciples.

Zhang Heming takes the lead and roughly yanks Su She's left sleeve up. Thick white bandages, stained with seeping blood, encircle his arm from wrist to shoulder. Jin Guangyao inhales sharply and grabs Su She's wrist himself, unwrapping layer after layer of bloody cloth until the numerous sores pockmarking his arm are exposed.

"Su-zongzhu," Jin Guangyao gasps, his voice trembling. "How could you!"

There's a single moment of stunned silence, like a drop of water hanging on the edge of the leaf, and then—

"Su Minshan has cursed Jin Zixun!" Yao-zongzhu roars, his eyes bugging out as he jabs a finger toward Su She, and the crowd breaks out into an even greater cacophony than before.

Jin Guangyao's face is a picture-perfect example of betrayal: eyes wide, mouth parted, tears glimmering at the corners of his eyelashes. "Su Minshan," he cries, waiting for the crowd to quiet. "Su Minshan! How could you curse Zixun like this!"

Hanguang-jun says coldly, "Su She was also at Qiongqi Path, channeling resentful energy through a dizi to coerce Wen Qionglin into murdering Wei Wuxian, and to frame Wei Wuxian for whatever events he had planned next. Fortunately, I caught him before he could do so." He pulls out the bamboo dizi Su She was playing, holding it up for everyone to see. "This was the dizi he was using. It is engraved with the symbol of the Moling Su sect."

"That's not true!" Su She shouts, reaching for his sword. Zhang Heming intercepts him, grabbing his wrists and twisting them tight behind his back. "Lianfang-zun, L-Lianfang-zun, please! I was only doing what you told me to! Getting rid of the scourge of the cultivation world, both of them, the Yiling Laozu and the Ghost General—framing them for Jin Zixun's death! Those were your orders!"

"My orders?" Jin Guangyao jumps back like he's been scalded. "I would never order someone to harm my own guests, much less my own kin!"

Jin Zixun, who at this point has remained silent, suddenly launches himself at Su She with a feral cry. The Lan disciples barely pull Su She back in time to avoid the tip of Jin Zixun's blade.

"Zixun! Don't!" Jin Guangyao shouts. "Zixun, please, put down your sword—"

Jin Zixun lunges again, stumbling over the remnants of his robes. "This—little—nobody—how—dare—he—" He snarls in outrage, kicking his robes off his ankles until he's left in nothing but his underwear, and careens forward, forcing the Lan disciples move Su She back even further. "Let me at him! LET ME AT HIM! HOW DARE—MMMPPH! MPMH! MPMH!" Jin Zixun drops his sword with a clatter, pawing frantically at his mouth. "MMMPPH!"

"Hanguang-jun," Su She sneers, "You dare to cast the Lan silencing spell on someone outside your own s—mmph! MMMPPH!"

Hanguang-jun meets Wei Wuxian's surprised look with a raised eyebrow, a self-satisfied smile twitching at the corners of his lips. Across the aisle, Zewu-jun sighs while the Lan disciples exchange smirks. Lan Sizhui catches Lan Jingyi's eye and grins.

"MMMPH! MMPH! MMMMPH!" Su She screams, his face going almost purple with rage as he struggles against the Lan disciples' grips. "MMMMPH!"

Zhang Heming raises his hand and delivers a swift, pointed blow to Su She's neck, knocking him unconscious. Across from Su She, Jin Zixun lets out a final muffled wail, then collapses face-first onto the floor in a dead faint. Jin Guangyao hurriedly gestures for servants to carry Jin Zixun away, leaving Su She hanging in the Lan disciples' arms.

"All right," Jin Guangyao says, taking a deep breath. His usual calm smile reappears on his face. "All right! It must be clear to everyone by now that the culprit is Su Minshan. Not only did he curse Zixun for some unknown reason, he also attempted to frame Wei Wuxian for the curse—and kill Wei Wuxian by turning the Ghost General against him. It sounds like he also planned to kill Zixun somehow as well!"

"That's right!" Yao-zongzhu interrupts, nodding emphatically. "In this instance, Wei Wuxian is blameless! Su Minshan was the culprit, just like when he betrayed Gusu Lan to the Wen!"

The gathered crowd bursts into noise once again.

"Once a traitor, always a traitor!" Ouyang-zongzhu declares, gesticulating wildly. "We should never have allowed this snake into our company!"

"Who knows what other evil plots he's carried out behind our backs!" Yao-zongzhu shouts, gaining steam. "For all we know, he's not only responsible for the destruction of the Cloud Recesses, but also for the massacre at Lotus Pier! I have heard Wei Wuxian bested Su Minshan in a duel during the guest lectures! To think that Su Minshan could commit such terrible crimes for such a petty grudge!"

Jiang-zongzhu snorts loudly, but he doesn't open his mouth to counter the far-fetched suggestion. Wei Wuxian glances at him with an unreadable expression, then quickly looks away.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian says under his breath, "Should we put a stop to this?"

Hanguang-jun makes a noncommittal noise. Allegations fly around the room, each wilder than the next: that Su She had conspired with the Wen to plant the Waterborne Abyss in Caiyi Town's Biling Lake during the Gusu Lan guest lectures, that he had lit the first match of the fire that burned down the Cloud Recesses Library Pavilion, that he had secretly gone to seek tutelage from Wen Ruohan during the war after he betrayed the Lan, that he had founded a sect to turn his own members into an army of puppets controlled by resentful energy. The last one makes Wei Wuxian laugh bitterly, and he scrubs his hand against his eyes as he watches the crowd that so vehemently hated him turn against one of their own.

"Justice!" Yao-zongzhu shouts, sloppily pouring wine into a cup and raising it. "We demand justice for the Lan, and for the Jin, and even for Wei Wuxian!"

Wei Wuxian rubs his temples. "I suppose that's better than everyone wanting to kill me," he mumbles.

"The mob doesn't seem to remember its past loyalties very clearly, but at least it forgets its grudges just as fast," Nie Mingjue observes with a scoff, frowning as he observes Jin Guangyao's frantic attempts to silence the crowd. He claps his hands roughly and bellows, "Everyone! QUIET!"

The shouting and screaming die down at once. "Thank you, Da-ge," Jin Guangyao says, and he puts on an appeasing smile, clasping his hands together. "It's unfortunate that the celebration today was interrupted by such a terrible sequence of events. The Jin will, of course, imprison Su Minshan until he can be brought to trial in front of His Excellency."

Lan Sizhui's stomach sinks all the way down to his toes as the crowd murmurs in agreement. There's no way anyone can counter that. Who knows how Jin Guangyao will manipulate the situation with Su She in his control?

"Um," says Nie Huaisang, his voice ringing clear across the room, "Er-ge, I don't want to speak on your behalf, but shouldn't Gusu Lan get a say too?"

"Gusu Lan should take custody of the traitor!" a suspiciously high-pitched voice shouts in Lan Sizhui's ear. Lan Jingyi covers his smirk with his sleeve when Lan Sizhui turns to look at him.

"Well spoken!" Yao-zongzhu shouts, though he looks a little confused as to who he should be addressing. "Su Minshan committed his first betrayal against the Lan, and he has never faced any consequences for it! Let Gusu Lan bring him to justice!"

"Hear, hear!" Ouyang-zongzhu croaks. "Well said!"

Zewu-jun clears his throat and moves to the center of the circle. Jin Guangyao looks like he's about to protest, but he catches Zewu-jun's gaze and steps back, conceding.

"Everyone, please listen," Zewu-jun says with his usual quiet authority. "The Lan sect appreciates the offer to take custody of Su Minshan and make him face consequences for his betrayal. It is an opportunity to remedy a longstanding transgression that has never been addressed. However, given that Su Minshan has now perpetrated crimes against both the Jin and the Lan, it would be unfair for us to be the sole arbitrators of this case. We must bring this matter to the Chief Cultivator and defer to his final judgment. I am sure he will take the wrongs committed against all parties into account."

"You are wise as always, Er-ge," Jin Guangyao says with a smile that looks almost genuine.

Zewu-jun gives him a small smile. "Thank you, A-Yao. Now, the foremost priority is to remove the curse from Jin Zixun, and then proceed with the appropriate measures for punishment. It is evident that there is a great deal of animosity between Su Minshan and the Lan, and between Su Minshan and the Jin. I propose that we hand over custody to a neutral party. Chifeng-zun is our sworn brother, and I trust he will ensure that Su Minshan's fair treatment as a prisoner." He turns to Nie Mingjue and bows beseechingly. "Mingjue-xiong,

would you do us the favor of taking custody of Su Minshan? We are aware it is a sudden responsibility to place upon you and your sect."

"I would gladly honor your request," Nie Mingjue says. "We are leaving tomorrow morning. Bring him to my chambers. We'll keep an eye on him tonight."

"Da-ge, that is very unconventional." Jin Guangyao's brow creases. "We can keep him in the dungeon until you are ready to depart."

"He is under my custody now, and so he will be under my watch," Nie Mingjue declares, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Very well," Jin Guangyao murmurs, lowering his eyes.

Nie Mingjue beckons over his contingent of disciples, and the Lan transfer the still-unconscious Su She over to them with obvious relief. "Let's go," Nie Mingjue declares, and he leads his disciples out of the hall. Nie Huaisang lingers a moment, glancing between Jin Guangyao, Lan Xichen, Hanguang-jun, and Wei Wuxian, then hurries after his brother with a wave of his fan.

An awkward silence falls in the hall. Hanguang-jun is the first to break it. "Xiongzhong," he says, bowing. "Wei Ying and I will take our leave now. Boys, come along."

Lan Sizhui warily creeps out from behind the table, latching onto Hanguang-jun's leg. Lan Jingyi goes with him, a silent support, tilting his chin up at anyone whose eyes linger on them for too long.

"Zewu-jun, Lianfang-zun, I thank you for your kindness tonight." Wei Wuxian says with a low bow. "I will take my leave." He catches Jiang-zongzhu's eye, a silent, almost imperceptible exchange passing between them, then turns and smiles at Lan Sizhui, bending down to pick him up as Hanguang-jun also does the same with Lan Jingyi. Together, they walk down the aisle toward the doors, straight-backed and stiff with the weight of everyone's stares on the back.

"Wait," someone says faintly as they step out of the hall. "Where did those children come from?"

Chapter End Notes

The epilogue will be up tomorrow, a bit later in the day than usual. I'm dying to know what everyone thought of this chapter - please do let me know! Emojis, gifs, text comments, and exclamation marks are all accepted, among others. :D

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first thing Jin Ling sees when he wakes is the worried face of his jiujiu hovering above him.

"Jiujiu?" Jin Ling mumbles, and then he bolts upright with a gasp. He can talk. He can talk! He has teeth! And motor skills! He lifts his arms, marveling at their length and strength, then kicks his legs so hard that he throws off the heavy blanket that was covering most of his body.

"A-Ling," Jiujiu growls, grabbing him by the shoulders, "what the hell were you thinking?"

"Aiyah, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian says, appearing behind Jiujiu and clicking his tongue. "Is that any way to treat your own nephew? He just woke up!"

Jin Ling blinks. Wei Wuxian seems...different, somehow. He's still dressed in his usual black and red, cloud patterns shimmering with each movement, but there's a silver guan with the design of a pine tree atop his head, and he looks—settled in a way Jin Ling has never seen. Jin Ling's eyes drift down to Wei Wuxian's hand, and he almost falls out of the bed in shock: there, clasped in Wei Wuxian's fingers, is the Clarity Bell that Wei Wuxian gifted him on his hundredth day, nine-petaled lotus and all. He's reaching out a hand for it before he even realizes, and Wei Wuxian hands it to him with a small laugh.

"There you go, A-Ling," Wei Wuxian says, his sleeve dropping down and exposing his forearm. There's a light blue ribbon with a cloud emblem tied around his wrist—Lan Wangji's forehead ribbon. Jin Ling stares at it. Wei Wuxian wore Lan Wangji's ribbon around his wrist during their extremely short betrothal, but after their marriage he began wearing it in his hair alongside his own red ribbon. Why isn't he—

"A-Ling, are you paying attention? I can't believe you didn't tell me your bell was cracked! It's all fixed now, and it should stop you from getting into this sort of trouble next time."

Trouble? Jin Ling wonders, all thoughts of the forehead ribbon disappearing. He frowns, trying to recall—and then it clicks. The array! So many things have happened that he'd practically forgotten what first kicked off his strange journey into the past. Speaking of which—Jin Ling stares at the Clarity Bell, turning it over and over in his hands. Does this mean what he thinks it means? Did he change the future?

"I'm going to get the doctor and send a message to Jinlintai," Jiujiu announces. He jabs a finger in Jin Ling's direction. "A-Ling! Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again or I'll break your legs!"

"What an affectionate jiujiu you have, A-Ling," Wei Wuxian says with a fond laugh as Jiujiu storms off in a whirl of purple robes. "Sizhui and Jingyi are here too, by the way. Look to

your right."

Jin Ling follows Wei Wuxian's gaze to Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi, who are indeed resting next to him, their chests rising and falling in deep, even breaths. They've both been stripped down to their underrobes—as has Jin Ling, he realizes suddenly—but their Lan forehead ribbons are tied neatly around their brows, still with the same design and ornamentation Jin Ling is familiar with. That hasn't changed, then.

It takes Jin Ling another moment to process his surroundings and figure out where he is. Blue and white, cloud motifs, delicate jade pendants, dark wood with clean lines—he must be in the Cloud Recesses. The pieces come together slowly. The closest major sect to the former Moling Su territory is the Gusu Lan sect. Hanguang-jun and Wei Wuxian must have been looking for Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi after they failed to return home on time, and somebody—likely Wei Wuxian—must have written to Jiujiu when Jin Ling was brought here alongside them.

A small moan shakes him out of his thoughts. On the adjacent bed, Lan Sizhui twitches and moans, a frown marring his face as he tries to open his eyes.

"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian breathes, darting over to his side.

"Xian-gege," Lan Sizhui mumbles, eyes fluttering open. He squints at Wei Wuxian, slowly blinking, and then hurriedly levers himself up onto his elbows with a quick, startled breath as he lifts a trembling hand to his forehead, sucking in a gasp when his fingers brush against the ribbon. He lifts his head and looks to his right, where Lan Jingyi is still sleeping, then meets Jin Ling's gaze, mouth parting in shock when Jin Ling clears his throat awkwardly and holds up the Clarity Bell.

Before either of them can figure out how to ask the question, an unfamiliar woman sweeps into the room, carrying a leather satchel in one hand. Like Wei Wuxian, she wears a guan with a stylized pine tree, and her robes are red and black with a very subtle pattern of flames. Jiujiu and Hanguang-jun flank her, taking positions at Jin Ling's and Lan Sizhui's sides, respectively.

"Qing-gugu?" Lan Sizhui says in a strangled tone.

The woman turns to him, brow furrowing. "Yes, A-Yuan?"

"Qing-gugu," Lan Sizhui repeats, his voice breaking. "Wen Qing?"

Jin Ling's jaw drops.

"Sizhui," Wen Qing says with a deep frown, "*what* did you just call me?"

"You're alive," Lan Sizhui says, eyes round with wonder. "Qing-gugu, you're *alive*."

"Yes, of course I am—"

Without warning, Lan Sizhui's face crumples, and he begins to cry, his whole body shuddering with the force of his tears. Wen Qing rushes to his side, her face the picture of

alarm, and begins to examine his meridians aggressively. Hanguang-jun places a comforting hand on his shoulder while Wei Wuxian takes his hand and makes soft shushing noises, patting Lan Sizhui's head like he's a child instead of a fully grown young man.

"A-jie? What's going on?"

Jin Ling looks up to see Wen Ning, the Ghost General himself, approach the group with cautious bewilderment. He looks cleaner than Jin Ling has ever seen him, and he's dressed in the same colors and symbols as Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian, though his hair is styled in a simple, neat topknot instead of being decorated with a guan. The black veins indicating his status as a not-quite-fierce-corpse are barely visible past his high collar, leaving his pale skin as the only marker that he might not be fully human. Jiujiu doesn't move a muscle—in fact, he seems completely relaxed as Wen Ning hurries over to Lan Sizhui and pulls a clean handkerchief out of his robes, pressing it into his hand. "A-Yuan, it's all right."

"Hnnng," Lan Jingyi groans suddenly, sitting up and squinting groggily. He rubs his eyes hard with his knuckles like he's not sure whether or not he's dreaming. "Um," he says to no one in particular, "what, exactly, is going on?"

Jin Ling clears his throat and holds up the Clarity Bell, hoping it'll be enough of an explanation. Lan Jingyi gapes at it for a second, then asks in a hushed voice, "We did it?"

"We did it," Jin Ling answers.

"We did it," Lan Sizhui says, his voice thick, his face buried in his hands. "We did it."

"Did *what*?" Jiujiu asks impatiently.

No one answers.

Jiujiu huffs and rolls his eyes. "Whatever. Jin Ling, your parents and your sisters are very happy that you're still alive, and they ask that you make a safe return to Jinlintai as soon as Wen-daifu releases you from this infirmary."

"Parents?" Jin Ling echoes, his voice sounding distant to his own ears. "*Sisters*?"

"Yes, who else?" Jiujiu asks with a raise of an eyebrow. His eyes narrow, and he looks between Jin Ling, Lan Jingyi, and Lan Sizhui suspiciously. "What the hell is wrong with you three?"

"Nothing," Jin Ling answers hastily. "Nothing's wrong, Jiujiu, I swear." He rubs his thumb along the metal petals of the lotus, tamping down the urge to laugh giddily as the future—the present?—opens up before him. Parents. Siblings. Wei Wuxian as his da-jiujiu, and the Dafan Wen as allies, maybe even friends. It's more than he ever dared to dream about, and his heart is so full of joy he feels like he could burst. Lan Sizhui sniffs and lifts his head, catching Lan Jingyi's eye first, then Jin Ling's, and the three of them exchange small, triumphant smiles as their friends and family bustle around them, alive and well.

Post-script

I know there are lots of lingering questions, so please see my answers below. I wouldn't have been able to address these without writing another 30K... 😊

But what about Jin Guangyao?!

Notice that Jiang Cheng did not mention Jin Guangyao when he mentioned Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli...but is that because Jiang Cheng didn't think to mention him, or because Jin Guangyao is indisposed? I'll leave that to your interpretation! Some ends can't be wrapped up so neatly. I will say that Su She was executed for treason shortly after Jin Ling's hundredth day celebration, and Jin Guangshan died shortly before the epilogue.

What's the deal with the pine tree?

It's the symbol of the Yiling Wei sect, which is a subsidiary to the Jiang sect. The Wei sect resettled in Yiling from the Burial Mounds, and disciples are renowned for their skill with talismans and medicine. The pine tree is an evergreen that is considered one of the three friends of winter in Chinese culture, and it symbolizes people who "maintain moral integrity and principles in the face of calamity and difficult situations." Pine trees are often planted around tombs and in graveyards. Find more info [here](#) and [here](#). (Thank you to my fellow trash pandas in the Yiling Trash Mounds server for the sect symbol idea!)

Is Sizhui a Lan?

Yes. After Jin Ling's hundredth day celebration, the Wens and Wei Wuxian agreed to let Lan Wangji adopt A-Yuan as his ward, so that A-Yuan would be protected in case anything happened to them. The Yiling Wei sect was established seven years later after a long series of negotiations. However, Lan Wangji took A-Yuan to visit his family in the Burial Mounds and Yiling every single week, and sometimes more than that when A-Yuan was really missing them; he refused to let A-Yuan go through the same pain of separation that he experienced as a child. This had the added bonus of letting Lan Wangji visit (court) Wei Wuxian frequently.

Lan Wangji gave Lan Sizhui his courtesy name to express his love for Wei Wuxian. Wen Qing, Jiang Cheng, and several others rolled their eyes about it.

Are WangXian together or not?

They've been in love for a long time and are currently betrothed. In fact, Lan Wangji had just finished formally proposing to Wei Wuxian in Yiling when they found out that Jin Ling, Lan Jingyi, and Lan Sizhui had gone missing.

Jin Ling had it right: Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, accompanied by Wen Qing and Wen Ning, went searching for the three juniors and found them unconscious in the middle of a field under the remains of a tattered spirit net. When the juniors were unable to be woken, they were brought back to the Cloud Recesses as Gusu Lan was the closest sect. Wen Qing and Wen Ning began to treat them. Wei Wuxian wrote to Jiang Yanli, who

was unable to leave Jinlintai on account of planning the Chief Cultivator's funeral; Jiang Yanli promptly wrote to Jiang Cheng, who flew straight to the Cloud Recesses to check on Jin Ling's well-being (and to find out how the betrothal went).

Wen Qing will lead the Yiling Wei sect after Wei Wuxian marries into Gusu Lan.

What about their past lives and memories?

To quote *Doctor Who*: wibbly wobbly, timey-wimey...thing. *handwaves*

I hope you've enjoyed this journey. If you have, please let me know with a comment, kudos, message, retweet, reblog, or whatever form you wish. Transformative works are welcome - please see my AO3 profile for more details.

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